

**The Flying Saucers Are Very Very Real**  
**by David M. Brown**

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ARE VERY VERY REAL**

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## PREFACE

AS THOSE IN THE KNOW ALREADY know, by the second decade of the 21st century our Earthling way of life had been rendered nugatory by aliens from outer space.

How did it happen?

How did the few of us who did find out about the visitors and their sinister plans manage to do so? And why were the early signs of danger that we few had first encountered in the 1950s, and that we so earnestly reported, so blithely ignored? So that the peoples of Earth now find themselves almost without hope to recover what has been so mysteriously and surreptitiously yet openly and flagrantly lost?

The pages that follow tell the shocking story in full bone-chilling detail.

Read it if you dare.

It is easy to see why both the sundry space aliens and sundry Quisling or Vichy humans have been loathe to let the people of Earth read my account and assess its veracity for themselves; and then, if persuaded, to determine whether and how to mount a planet-wide resistance. The pages that follow offer objective and irrefutable firsthand documentation of UFO and flying-saucer phenomena, *and* of the alien beings responsible for these phenomena. I tell the real true actual factual story of what really, truly, actually, in fact happened and *is still happening this very minute right under your nose* if you could but attend to the glaring manifestations of these secret happenings.

The paradox and the tragedy of the delayed publication of this volume is that the very first space alien I ever met was eager to let me propagate the truth about the threat Earth faced, even wanted to help. Was even rather pushy about it. His successors, though, were not so accommodating as they went about their tasks.

What tasks? Reconnaissance, infiltration, and the foisting of freedom-crushing public policies as prelude to total conquest of our planet—an ongoing conquest to be followed by our utter annihilation if and when the aliens from outer space should decide that further subjecting us is just not worth the trouble.

Skeptical? Me too, once upon a time. Heh. Was I ever. But read on. You are about to learn all there is to know about the strange extraterrestrial visitations of our planet; the governmental cover-up of the strange visitations by the strange extraterrestrials; the abduction by these same strange extraterrestrials of various human beings, from which cast of victims I do not exclude myself; and, not least, something of the tenor and sinew of the aliens' disturbing and not altogether mistaken indictment of Earth's culture and philosophies.

Back in the 1950s, when in a furioso panic I scribbled the earliest version of the manuscript you are about to read—offered at long last in this first quarter of the 21st century with only a few minor corrections of spelling, syntax, simile, sequence, syllogism and fact—I believed that we Earthlings still enjoyed a slim if dwindling chance to save ourselves.

Today, decades later, I must, alas, conclude otherwise.

Perhaps my pessimism is ill-founded, however. Perhaps you, the flabbergasted recipient of these mind-boggling revelations, possess just the right world-historical blend of brains, courage, and leadership-modeling ability to craft the rebel-coordinating plan for victory that we so desperately need in this our darkest hour.

Perhaps you will be the superhero who saves us all! Eh? How about that!

But whatever the hope for defeating the aliens from outer space may be, this hope depends, if justified, upon a close study of the account that follows. Our ability to sunder the alien-forged chains depends in the first instance on your ability and that of all other strong-minded ones to shuck your stupor and realize, among other crucial facts, that *the aliens have already almost totally won* and that there may well be nothing that you or anybody else can do about it. My advice: work to understand the problem before trying to solve it with whatever useless strategy you come up with. First understand, *then* fail.

The aliens are here. They have taken over and transmuted every lever, knob and dial of civilization. You are already acquainted with these entities. You have voted for them. Done business with them. Befriended them. Married them. Yes, that's right. During your trance-like amble through life you have most likely cooperated in your own enslavement, perhaps your own demise, not to mention that of everyone else as well.

Thank you. So. Much.

If you're saying, Uh, guy, I *haven't* been enslaved by any weird extraterrestrial aliens, it's a "free" country, or planet, whatever, etc., so what are you even *talking* about—well, I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you that this only goes to show how effective the aliens' mass ray-beam-based, parsec-powered brainwashing process has been. You don't even know that you are a mere minion now of intergalactic or maybe just intra-galactic but certainly interstellar forces that, over the course of the last half-century and more, have ever more rapidly and thoroughly tourniqueted our autonomy and foreclosed our future. So you better read this book (buy it first) before the aliens again act to suppress its unsuppressible truths!!

Unless, that is, you wish to continue to unsuspectingly live your life under the domination of the aliens instead of doing so in well-informed, suspecting kind of way.

Act now.

## CHAPTER ONE

ON APRIL FOOL'S DAY, 1949, THE U.S. Air Force stated: "The mere possibility of as-yet-unidentified flying objects requires our armed forces to be on continuous red alert. It is, however, also true that most such objects turn out to be manifestations of missile or other mundane aeronautic activity, atmospheric anomalies, wind-whipped Frisbees, problems focusing the camera and so forth. Humanity has no unambiguous evidence of extraterrestrial beings visiting this pale blue dot of ours.... Ergo, caution must be urged with respect to the tendency to interpret eerie dancing lights or blurry images as proof of alien visitors. Persons glimpsing such phenomena no doubt believe that they have witnessed 'flying saucers' or flying-saucer contrails and the like. The government can appreciate the sense of conviction animating such claims. We do not suppose that most of the reports are the product of infantile practical jokes, a puerile desire for attention, or a primordial fear of The Other. No. Not at all. Most who report the phenomena are sure that they have seen something that means something. But there is no cause for alarm. Everything is fine."

The day after April Fool's Day, 1949, this same U.S. Air Force press office issued another release: "There are no such things as flying saucers. Repeat. There are no such things as flying saucers."

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm....

It was all very interesting.

## CHAPTER TWO

BY THE TIME THE 1950S BEGAN in earnest, I had long been skeptical of the phenomena known as flying saucers (FS) or unidentified flying objects (UFOs), thought by many to have originated in an alien civilization or civilizations of a planet or planets the advance teams of which were bent on littering isolated byways of Earth with their screwy flight patterns as they pursued their missions of reconnaissance and conquest (MORAC). In my view, the disk-shaped, dirigible-shaped, street-lamp-shaped or airplane-shaped objects that baffled and thrilled so many impoverished, desperate, gullible souls were most likely terrestrial in origin, material, and purpose or non-purpose.

Moreover—and this, I felt, was the clincher—had not the label “unidentified” been enlisted to identify these unidentified objects as “unidentified,” thereby irrevocably identifying them as such?

Until I eventually became obliged to make common cause with a small but growing squad of bravely inquiring minds, I knew nothing of the ongoing cover-up by Air Force and other military and government personnel of the true unknown nature of these unknown objects with their faux-familiar shapes.

I do not blame myself for my naïveté and smug sense of infinite superiority. For I had not yet been harangued while trapped in a corner at cocktail parties by more than a few of the wacko, spittle-dribbling unwashed UFO nuts who valiantly espouse the frightening truth that so many of the uninitiated strive to deny to this very day.

In any case, it was with arch and dewy skepticism that I greeted the tele-email from Joe Purdy Bo Hippenthwaite, editor and publisher of *Super-True Blasto Investigations*:

EYES ONLY: WE BEEN INVESHTIGATING DIS HEAH FLYING SAUCER CRAZINESS STORY. YUP!! FIRST TIP HINTED BROBDINGNAGIAN COVER-UP OF OFFICIAL SECRET. GUBMINTAL COVER-UP, WOULDJA BELIEVE??? FAKE STORY TER HIDE REAL STORY!! WOULD GUBMINT DO DAT TER US?? ZAPPO-WOWWO STORY POTENTIAL HEAH. CAN YA BURROW INTER IT WASHINGTON SIDE? LEZ TALK! CRAMMO!

Oh dear, I thought. Oh *dear*. This is how I must make my living now. I, former press flak for uncelebrated celebrities, former juggler, former sidewalk-paver, former short-order cook, former rabbit-suit-wearing five-and-dime-store flyer distributor, former graduate student in contemporary intellectual history from Descartes to the Present, I—I!—*this* ego, *this* self, no mere stream of disconnected sensations but a unified, coherent, self-conscious knower and actor—reduced to vetting the torrid fantasies of a flibdoid tabloid editor with delusions of circ-goosing pandeur!

Instead of shooting myself in my big toe, however, I batted out an alacritous reply at the nearest tele-email office—SOUNDS BOFFO-ZOWIE!! ON MY WAY SOONEST! UBER AND OUT!—a communiqué loosed into the cyber vortex at lightning speed by the bored tele-boy at the giant brown-toothpaste-hued tele-bodega—after which I then batted out a twitchy follow-up—“UBER” IS GERMAN FOR “OVER,” OK, BYE!—this communiqué also being loosed into the cyber vortex at lightning speed by the bored tele-boy at the giant brown-toothpaste-hued tele-kiosk—and hopped onto the next DC-to-

NYC dirigible, the Hufflepluff 949er. (The grammar is all there, don't tell me the aliens have also destroyed your sentence-reading ability.)

The next day I strolled my sophisticated Investigative-Reporter-on-the-Job stroll, perhaps it was more of an amble, into Hippenthwaite's offices at *Super-True Blasto Investigations*.

"The man hisself!" he burbled in the dramatically fatuous way that was all his own. "What took you so long, Kong!? Siddown, get a load off, and get a loada da latest!"

"Whuddup?"

"Gubmint conspiracy, is whaddup, pup: yup!" Hippenthwaite smacked a flabbitudinous palm on the already cracked acrylic of his balsa-and-acrylic desk and told me about a straw-haired Air Force pilot by the name of Beauregard Jehoshaphat Johnson, a man of unimpeachable integrity, who had died in a plane crash within seconds of relaying to HQ details of a red or green saucer-shaped flying object hurtling across his fight path. The transcript of the conversation was mysteriously unavailable, however. Hippenthwaite also told me about a mysterious government report alluding to the incident that was strangely contradicted by another mysterious government report. It all added up to...something.

Now go get the story, the boss barked.

"And don't let 'em hornswoggle ya theah in Washington!" he commanded. "Inside dope is inside dope, but yer only hope is ta grope the rope!" That was his way of saying he liked to rhyme and didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. I should come up with the scoop but accept with delirious gratitude how it was hizzown brutal schooling that had guided me every misstep of the way, over every spiky shoal, through every juddering hoop, past every puddle-strewn, punk-infested dark alley. "A stitch in time saves nine!" he added.

He handed me a file.

"Heah's a file! Now, this might take a while. Walk every mile! Do it in style! Don't fudge it! But don't go over budget! And make it snappy! Make yer editor happy! Crumble, bumble, rumble, toil and tumble!"

## CHAPTER THREE

SO IT BEGAN.

For six bone-chilling months, during which I liberally applied ice packs to try to temper the recurring fever of devotion to my gloriously rediscovered indifference to journalistic—or, to deploy a reportorial shorthand, any—ideals, I labored alone and in collaboration with many another intrepid and bored seeker. These included dauntless partisans of truth from the Air Force, the FBI and other government agencies, as well as ace investigative journalists from such stalled-wart magazines as *Sizzling Saucer Sections*, *Disks and Darts*, *Alien Invaders Sighted and Denounced!* and, last, and least, the always redoubtable *Unidentified Schmunidentified*. Our Sisyphean task was to uncork the brain-addling riddle of the mysterious and eerie, glowing, speeding, coming, going, unidentified flying objects choking the skyways of our planet over isolated roads and withered corn fields as the occupants of the sky-blasting vehicles prepared for what could only be a massive invasion of our mostly stupid and, in the galactic scheme of things, if we are to be candid, strategically worthless if easily conquerable planet.

I trudged and trudged and trudged. I investigated here, investigated there. Investigated everywhere. In a coat. In a moat. Near and far. Using my car. What I learned was that all the myriad clues dredged from rocketry, pilotry, astronautics, epistemologies, heraldry, forensics, and the yellowing newspaper clips of earlier bona fide sightings of fuzzy blinking ephemera added up to only one shocking, marrow-curdling, ice-packed conclusion: much to my sleepy surprise, the saucers were indeed “manned” by multi-tentacled spies from another planet (that is, assuming they had tentacles)! Moreover, these flying saucers had come from maybe ten or a hundred or, who knows, maybe a million alien-infested planets (but either one or a lot of planets, if any, whatever the number)!

The scope and portent of the thing was vast. The advance scouts sent to our planet by an unimaginably huge and powerful invasion force bent on the conquest of Earth could only be the advance scouts of an unimaginably huge and powerful invasion force bent on the conquest of Earth, *perhaps even on its annihilation!* For all I knew, the human race would soon be converted to bouillon cubes for the benefit of disgusting alien consumption. If so, what a pitiful end-of-line for us, the peoples of Earth in all our noble variety. Sure, we homo “sapiens” often bungled matters, but sometimes we did okay. Sometimes we did darn good. We had your Aristotle, your Michelangelo, your Einstein, your Sophia Loren, and at least ten other guys and gals like that to brag about. Was it to be that humanity was to be conquered by a species so culinarily primitive that it had not even gotten beyond the bouillon-cube stage of civilization, yet had somehow cracked the secret of faster-than-light space flight?

Whatever the terrifying plans of the aliens as they loop-de-looped in their unlicensed saucers, injecting random frissons into the empty lives of grannies and cowpokes everywhere, one thing was for sure, for *damn* sure: we, the peoples of Earth, were so many millions of sitting ducks! (And that’s not even counting the ducks!)

As the evidence swelled and mounted, threatening to bury me under an avalanche of obviousness, the gauzy reality of the unverifiable sightings became ever harder to evade. My lordly disdain for ludicrous unsubstantiated hypotheses was progressively displaced by humble cognizance of their validity. Finally, my ice-cold cynicism, world-weary



agnosticism, and Popperian demand for infinite repeatable instances with which to construct invulnerable probability matrices could do nothing but melt messily into the carpet—high-pile, big mistake!

Yes, the aliens from outer space were out there. That much I now knew. Less clear was how we the American people—and other peoples in all the other little countries not the United States—could begin to prepare to defend ourselves against the aliens if the truth about them was being hidden from us by our own government.

Hidden by conspiracy!

## CHAPTER FOUR

FOR THAT WAS THE OTHER BIG part of the story, realized I as my cogitations proceeded apace. The conspiracy!

Thus, the story had two parts. Part the First, an imminent alien invasion aiming to subjugate and even destroy all humanity! Part the Second, the governmental cover-up of the facts of the imminent invasion, making it all too likely that by the time the invasion was in full swing, it would be way too late for Earth to prepare our superfluous defense!

It was a puzzler. Why would an Earthling-staffed government want to stop fellow Earthlings from defending ourselves, even ineffectually? Were not politicians and bureaucrats also Earthlings, human beings born and bred on this planet just like the rest of us? Maybe, like other traitors, they were just trying to reserve a place for themselves in the new world order that they expected the aliens to establish. Maybe....

But wait a minute, wait a minute. Here's a thought (I thought). What if the aliens themselves have been infiltrating our key government institutions, thus positioning themselves to subtly and not so subtly counter any efforts to counter them? Think about it. Think about it. If many of our key leaders and key subordinates are in fact either *aliens from another planet* or their mind-controlled human puppets, well, of *course* they're going to want to cover up the facts of the imminent invasion. *No wonder* they're so eager to "explain" the fuzzy photographs and fragmentary sightings by reference to weather balloons, missiles, Frisbees and the like. *No wonder*. And no wonder they impose so many stupidly profligate and autocratic public policies, the better to undercut our productivity and moral fiber, thereby weakening our ability to defend ourselves against the alien invaders.

Yeah! Oh yeah, baby! Now it's all starting to *fit!* To make *sense!* My *God!*

I was onto something. Something terrifying but illuminating, a klieg light in the black. I had to transcribe my glittering if baleful insights forthwith. I padded to my clunky 1950s-style tape recorder and bashed the RECORD button. "Here's a thought. If many of our key leaders and key subordinates are in fact either *aliens from another planet* or their mind-controlled human puppets, well, of *course* they're going to want to cover up the facts of the imminent invasion. *No wonder* they're so eager to 'explain' the fuzzy photographs and fragmentary sightings by reference to weather balloons, missiles, Frisbees and the like. *No wonder*. And no wonder they impose so many profligate and autocratic public policies, the better to undercut our productivity and moral fiber, thereby weakening our ability to defend ourselves against the alien invaders. Yeah! Oh yeah, baby! Now it's all starting to *fit!* To make *sense!* My *God!*"

It was worth taping a few index cards to the ice box to aid my memory and provide incidental inspiration during midnight raids of the refrigerator. One said: THOUGHT: ALIENS INFILTRATING FEDGOV? Another ruminated: WOULD EXPLAIN COVER-UP. A third: YEAH! OH YEAH, BABY!

If I were going to save humanity, I had to act and act fast. After all, it was already the 1950s, some 1,950+ years since the year 0. If I didn't get the word out about the aliens and the cover-up, *and as fast as possible*, the planet would probably get conquered by 1958 or 1961 or thereabouts at the latest, ending all human hopes and aspirations. Start typing, I told myself. Don't just sit there watching Ike and Lucille Ball on the black-and-

white, analog-broadcast box with the giant vacuum tube, the way all the other authentic 1950s dwellers are doing!

I called Hippenthwaite using one of the heavy and stationary Western Electric model 500 black rotary phones characteristic of this era, with the holes you have to stick your finger in and pull clockwise, again and again, to transmit the number. Long-distance calls were more expensive than tele-email, but *Super-True Blasto Investigations* was sure to reimburse me once its editor realized what a hot scoop I was ready to deliver unto the magazine's legions of otherwise-about-to-lapse subscribers.

"Hold the presses!" I bawled. "I'm gonna blast the lid off this thing, Hippo! How's this for a headline: ALIENS INFILTRATE FEDGOV!!! HENCE THE COVER-UP!!!"

"Well, 'n course they done doggone infiltrated the gubmint, bint! But we gotta have the proof! Ya got the proof, goof?"

I was horror-stricken by my editor's mundane insistence on the quotidian at such a moment of impending looming doom. It seemed so drastically inopportune.

"Bucket loads!"

"Well, come on down, clown!! Bless us! Clem, hold the presses! Stem 'em! Hot damn! Potsdam!"

Right. I had to come up with bucket loads of proof, but fast!

Alas, I could not, not fast, so the story was deep-sixed and the presses ran with a batch of stand-by copy, full of adamant questions instead of adamant assertions, under the headline ALIENS INFILTRATE FEDGOV??? ERGO THE COVER-UP??? And I never did get reimbursed for the long-distance phone call.

But sowing conflict and confusion among the Earthlings was exactly what the diabolically clever and insidiously manipulative, vicious aliens wanted. I understood this. Hippenthwaite grasped this critical fact as well. So he expressed only mild annoyance that I could not yet expose the alien infestation despite so many months of valiant inquiry. He would not remain patient with me forever, however.

Sigh. Maybe I would just have to invade the Earth myself. Why not?

It would be a story.

## CHAPTER FIVE

CONSIDER HOW MANY GALAXIES THERE ARE in the cosmos. Multiply that by the number of light years. That's an awful lot of potential founts of extraterrestrial life, for all that most of the universe consists of an inky blackness with just an occasional hydrogen atom drifting through.

Now imagine how many potentially life-bearing planets harbor forward-looking proto-bions which over the eons may evolve into multi-cellular organisms.

Whoa!

But take it further. If even a small percentage of that small percentage of multi-cellular organisms develops into sentient beings that can even occasionally ascend to we humans, in our prideful insistence, call human-level intelligence; and if even a teensy-weensy slice of that brain-blessed percentage survives the annihilative warfare which, we sadly suspect, must threaten to overwhelm any sufficiently advanced sentient species; and if, of the extant remnant of brainy extraterrestrial civilizations, even a fraction of a fraction stumble upon the formula for fuzzy-Frisbee-shape-based or weather-balloon-shape-based superluminal space flight—holy shmoly, there *must* be mobs of aliens from outer space cluttering our globe with their funky flying saucers at all hours of the night and day! It's simple math. If you can't do it in your head, try a slide rule.

I cannot claim to have recognized these facts with the alacrity which should be the hallmark of the fearless investigative reporter and forward-looking scientific thinker. Alas, even after in bad faith accepting the assignment from Hippenthwaite and spending months suffering the fast-drip water torture of being tutored by true believers in the aeronautic virtues of fuzzy-disk form factors, for the longest time I remained inert to the truth.

The fate of Earth hung in the balance. But even after months of desultory investigation, I had yet to focus my prodigious mind power on the problem as fully as my prodigious mind power needed to be focused. Skepticism and laziness reinforce each other (it's a vicious circle, it really is!). But finally I got my act together. And the more I harnessed my lazy mind to the pursuit of these urgent questions, the more my initial icy skepticism got chipped and melted by ever-more-persuasive inducto-deducto slaloms of slushy ratiocination.

Using my mighty mind power at full tilt, then, I skied with accelerating cognitive rapidity toward the inexorable conclusion that if but vagrant and indistinct glimpses of the alien presence were being vouchsafed to us, why, it was only because the extraterrestrials were such sneaky, agile, fuzzy-vehicle-riding sorts of beings, the sneaky bastards. What other explanation *could* there be?

It took me a little longer to slalom to the next flag in the chain of Popper-popping ratiocination: the translucently obvious implication that at least one or two of the alien advance teams must, in furtherance of their well-known invasion plans, and probably in close cooperation with the aliens infiltrating our government, be regularly abducting key members of our own species for who knows what hostile alien purposes.

Little—oh how little!—did I know, then, with what impertinent dispatch I myself would soon be abdu—but no, no, now is not yet the time in the narrative for me to be revealing details of the worst and most shocking, most nightmarish, most foreshadow-

instigating, most superlative-adjective-inducing incident of my life! No! Now is not the time! (And don't skip ahead!)

Invigorated by my newfound sense of mission, I put in another call to Hippenthwaite. I knew the number by heart, and it took me only five minutes to dial the digits using the hole-based, rotary number-dialing method necessitated by the clunky make-up of the phones we have in this era.

"I have a confession."

"Wuddat, brat?"

"I'm starting to believe this bullshit."

He pretend-palmed the voice-transmitting end of his own unwieldy handset and yelled: "Hey, disboisements department? Double dis man's retainer! It's a no-brainer! Cordwainer! Yo, Cordwainer! Get on the stick, ya d—"

"Goodbye now," I said. "I must take my leave, for I am determined to redouble my already assiduous efforts."

What I had inconveniently forgotten is that "assiduous" makes an ass out of "id" and "uous."

## CHAPTER SIX

ONE OF THE SUCTION-CUP-EQUIPPED INVESTIGATIVE TENTACLES that I had sent slithering in all directions and then forgotten about finally reeled in a lead in addition to all the other things the tentacles were reeling in.

A fellow by the name of Jose Enrique Gustavo Giuseppe Ferrari Montoya Iglesias Pepito Sanchez Fernando Alberto Jesus Armando Diego Romero Lucero Jones, or Joe Jones for short, formerly with the brash bimonthly *Interplanetary Hypnotism and Ten-Tailed Martian Mice*, had not long ago died in a car accident, and plays no part in our story.

But another fellow, Beelzebub Willis, a skinny, red-headed youth in the pay of the *Quarterly Hardware Spare Parts and Alien Monsters* catalog, played a part that I can only describe as pivotal. One day he came knocking on my door. Although he initially passed himself as nothing more than an eager door-to-door salesman and feverish enthusiast, I would soon learn that Beelzebub had in fact been referred to me by someone who knew somebody to whom I had mentioned my desire to find leads about alien invaders planning to conquer Earth.

The bulky catalog he was touting cost three dollars, a lot of money here in the 1950s. I tried to send him on his way with a few polite and meaningless words, to no avail.

Perhaps a few meaningful words were now called for?

Just as I was about to utter them, however, he hugged me with all his might—his sweater vest was polka-dotted, I noticed; his armpits were slightly damp; and he smelled of Aqua Velva (the mouthwash and the aftershave, both)—and looked up at me with worshipful blue eyes. Possibly cerulean.

“Oh sir. Sir. You are Mr.”—and at this juncture he uttered my august name in full—“the famous and prolific, intrepid investigative reporter for *Super-True Blasto Investigations*? Are you not?”

I didn’t know about intrepid. But why pick nits?

“I am that man,” I said humbly, easing myself out of the unexpected physical entanglement. “I must say that I like your flair for appositives. However, your timing is doubleplusungood. I am so very busy right now, doing the intrepid investigations.”

“Oh but sir, sir. I—I—I—”

“Yes?”

“I love you—”

Oh no.

“—r work.”

Phew. Okay.

“Allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Beelzebub Willis and I love your work and I know I have discovered something about the alien assault being planned that can only be of the greatest assistance to you, sir! I probably should mention that I was referred to you, sir, by someone who knows someone who knows you. But I felt too intimidated by being in the presence your greatness to be as straightforward as you deserved. For this I am sorry, sir.”

“First, you can stop calling me ‘sir,’ it makes me feel old.”

“Oh no, you’re quite young...ish, really, s—uh, so what then shall I call you, O Great One?”

"I can live with 'Great One.' Second—"

"Yes, Great One!"

"Second—and I didn't really mean that thing about calling me 'Great One'—but second, I thought you were here to foist your catalog on me."

"Oh, yes, well.... I do get a commission. It's not easy going to college and working at the same time, Great One, so I—"

"I have a confession. I'm really not that great."

"It's got all the hardware spare parts that you could want. Suppose you need a new hook jaw for your pipe wrench. On page 211 to 214 you find every size and shape of hook jaw. There is no need to buy a new pipe wrench, Great One. Simply snap your replacement hook jaw into your existing spring assembly, at much lower expense."

"I see. Hm. Maybe that would come in handy."

"And the second half of the catalog is all about alien monsters."

"Any photographs?"

"A few. For example, a toenail of the Loch Ness monster. If I may direct your attention to page 598..."

"That's okay, I'll take it." I fished a few soggy dollar bills out of my pocket. Maybe if I bought a copy of the catalog, the purchase would precipitate the young apprentice's exitus. But instead of jumping for joy at the celeritous sale, he clutched my wrist in a talon-like grip, forcibly thrust the bills back into my pocket, and burst into a fusillade or maybe an enfilade of tears.

"You don't like my humid dollars?" I asked, as he clutched my wrist and spat tears in all directions, gasping and hiccupping at whatever tragedy was afflicting him.

"It's not ab-b-bout the money, s-sir—I mean, Gr-Great One—it's about exp-p-po-posing and st-stopping the alien invasion. You need to l-listen to what I have t-to-to-to say—"

"Okay, okay, Beelzebub. I'll listen. You can let go now."

"Ok-k-kay...ok-k-kay.... Uh...G-Gr-Great One, is that a g-g-gun in your p-p-p-puh-pock-pock-pocket, or are you just g-g-guh-guh-guh-guh-glad to see me?"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

AS THE AGGLOMERATING EVIDENCE OF THE true nature of flying saucers cantilevered into my consciousness, I came to realize that only deliberately ignorant skeptics like my former obtuse self could doubt the probity, integrity, and penetratingly discerning percipience of the many slack-jawed witnesses to the glowing extraterrestrial spheroids as they indistinctly hurtled hither and thither in the UFO-littered 1950s. The sheer number of sightings of indistinct blobs of unknown malevolent character and shrouded origin was just too great—the repeated insistence on what the sightings must mean just too shrill and adamant—for any but the most willfully insensate to petulantly ignore.

Alas, the evidence, although abundant, and although its pieces cohered beautifully once properly juxtaposed and Elmer-glued together, was initially too patchy, scattered and indirect to be universally persuasive.

If only the visitations could be documented. If only there were a way to record the visitations on unimpeachable celluloid as they were happening! This attractive thought occurred to me more than once as my investigation progressed. I would exclaim in the privacy of my own mind while admiring my reflection in the mirror: “If only it were a lot easier than it is in our 1950s era to produce a continuous visual record of these numerous unexpected and startling encounters! Fuzzy-Frisbee photographs are sufficiently probative, sure. At least to the most astute among us. Yet how much more vivid and persuasive would be the evidence of these encounters if visual recordings could be much more readily prepared than is yet possible!”

Presumably, the technology would be invented one day. Eventually. Maybe in fifty years, maybe a hundred. But we needed the futuristic gadgetry now. What I envisioned: everyone carrying a super-compact movie camera in purse or pocket, which could be operated with a simple push of button and twirl of a few knobs. Soon enough, all doubts about the reality of the saucers and the alien beings “manning” them would be swept away. This would be feasible one day, I was sure. After all, room-sized computers had already shrunk to the size of two thirds of a room. Might not movie cameras shrink thus as well? With progressive miniaturization would come easy portability. Perhaps, one day, film cameras would become as small as hand-held radios and walkie-talkies—or smaller still!

My fantasies went even further. For what if the stationary black rotary phones that are standard-issue today could one day be liberated from the wires that presently confine them to tables and booths? And what if these liberated phones could interact with each other via radio signals alone? And what if persons were able to carry the de-wired phones around with them at all times, enabling them to make a phone call whenever they pleased? What about *that*?

And what if—now get this—what if, also, there could one day be a technology to *combine* a miniaturized movie camera with a miniaturized phone in such a way that it would become easy as pie—just by dialing a phone number!—to record a “mini-movie” at any time, initiating the process the moment an event worthy of being recorded began to occur? Right at that very moment!

Think of the possibilities!



Assuming that the human manipulators of such mobile rotary film cameras made sure to keep the battery powered at all times by regularly turning the little hand crank, it would be the work of a trice to record in rampant entirety every one of the surprise appearances of the eerily whirring phosphorescent metallic saucers; and, then, with equal trice-like efficiency, to transmit the record of these phantasmagoric indicia via chirruping de-wired telephone signal to the nearest celluloid reproduction factory. Within days, duplicates of the film could be distributed to every newsroom, library, and cinematic palace in the country.

In that way, a great many of the UFO encounters which, today, leave no undisputed trace, would be permanently embalmed in eight-millimeter celluloid for all to see! Every interested person could then with lordly leisure and minute care study every aspect of the flight paths of the weirdly whirring metallic fuzzy saucers; could even, should he wish, help trace those paths back to the saucers' launching stations. With so many UFO encounters being recorded in this manner, the puling skeptics who had hitherto been so liberal in heaping scorn on sober investigations of unidentified phenomena would be obliged to hide their surly heads in shame!

And yet, and yet—even today, here in the 1950s, despite the inadequacy of our primitive 1950s equipment, the valiant defenders of Earth have plenty enough data to convince everyone of the existence of the alien invaders in their flying saucers, and the threat they pose, given how many witnesses are willing to attest to the things they are willing to attest to.

One might, for example, call to the stand PFC Beauregard Johnson, Air Force pilot, who during a test flight near an abandoned mountain range heard an eerily strange humming noise and espied a flash of blue that he had assumed was a bee with a flashlight until the moment that a super-speeding, eerily glowing saucer sliced right across his flight path. Swerving, banking, jumping, humping, Johnson, though jittery, managed to alert the honchos back at HQ, yelling out what he observed even while raggedly pursuing the mysteriously zigging and zagging saucer. But soon it was all over. His plane had crashed into one of the mountains. Johnson himself can no longer attest to anything, since he's dead. Moreover, the alcohol levels revealed by the autopsy may have been a little higher than normal. But for unassailable proof of these events we need merely quote the transcript of his final, flying-saucer-interrupted flight. Or—we *could* quote from it, if that transcript hadn't been stamped CLASSIFIED by the government and tossed in an incinerator after being torn in half and crosscut-shredded.

Or how about Milly McGillicutty, the milkmaid and seamstress who was sauntering along washboard-ridden Route 1 in Kansas farm country when she heard strange screeching and roaring noises flowing from lights hurtling straight toward her on that very road? The circular blobs of light were as loud as an eighteen-wheeler but could only have been a dozen-and-a-half flying saucers. Suddenly, in one concentrated formation, with the linear discipline possible only to aliens from outer space, the luminous blobs fell upon her with a whistling blast, then sped past, past, past, past, until, finally, they were gone, taking with them all her youthful illusions. Milly McGillicutty never walked straight again. She is convinced that the unknown beings operating the unknown knobs and levers within those pulsating, keening blobs of light are no friends of the peoples of Earth. No friends at all!

Then there's Joey Pantoosalano of Brooklyn, who labors on the assembly line of the Better Nodules Incorporated factory on the corner of 4th and Nadir. One starry night his wife came looking for him behind the shed behind their brownstone apartment complex, an angry glint in her eyes. He could only point skyward, mute and stunned: the indistinct, shimmering shape was there, hovering, until, a split-second later, it hurtled into the distant gloom!

These and so many other people have witnessed aliens from outer space tooling around our planet in their whirring, fuzzy spaceships. Thanks to my intrepid reporting, I had stacks of letters and telegrams yea high from such witnesses. The stacks just kept growing. These were good people who wanted to do something about the danger confronting all Earth.

I had no choice but to accept the fact that the skyways above our lonely roads and withered cornfields were being littered by legions of zig-zagging spaceships helmed by aliens from outer space determined to grind us under their heels. The only other possible explanation would have been some other explanation, which didn't seem likely.

Events would soon confirm these conclusions in spades. How I wish we had all been wrong! Unfortunately, we weren't.

Aliens from outer space were visiting the Earth.

And their plans were sinister and cruel.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

EVEN THE SUBORNED HUMAN OFFICIALS OF the federal government could not help but let slip on occasion that the visitations were real.

Not long after I began my inquiries, an Air Force Intelligence officer admitted in an unguarded moment that if aliens from outer space were indeed inclined to visit the earth, it made sense that they should do so after the electromagnetic signatures of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had reached their star systems and thus alerted them to our presence in the cosmos. Once detected, such radiation would almost certainly pique the aliens' curiosity.

Even as the officer spoke these words, I realized their truth. I mean, if *I* were a hostile alien living a thousand light years from Earth, and radiation from atomic bombings on Earth had shown up on *my* monitor, the first thing *I* would do as a concerned galactic citizen of an alien civilization intent upon conquest of less-advanced civilizations is slither into my superluminal fuzzy flying saucer and zip right over to Earth. Maybe hold a war council first. Then fly straight to Earth.

After I began conveying this insight to others, however, some smarty-pants skeptics argued that if an alien civilization happened to be a thousand light years Earth, it would take a thousand years for light to travel between our location and theirs. The aliens would then perceive evidence of humanity's atomic capabilities at least a thousand years after the fact. Ergo, even if some wondrous faster-than-light drive enabled these aliens to arrive on Earth within a few hours of learning about our atomic blasts, they'd still be arriving a millennium from now. In the 2950s rather than the 1950s.

Uh huh. Oh. Okay, fine, so, one possibility is, maybe we're talking about Martians and Jupiterians, with some Alpha Centaurians thrown into the mix, not denizens of the planet Gloop-Gloop a thousand light years away. The Alpha Centaurians are only four light years or so distant from us, right? At the time of my initial investigations, the first atomic bombs had been detonated less than ten years ago. As for the Martians and Jupiterians, why, they reside within our very own solar system.

Or maybe the aliens are indeed thousands of light years away but have time-travel capability.

Satisfied now, nit-pickers?

Thing is—and here is the fact which has yet to penetrate the thick skulls of the skeptics, even as the alien invaders scheme to reduce us all to servitors or bouillon cubes—the alien invaders did not and do not *care* what irrational calculus we use to pretend that they are not already flitting about our skyways and, when on the ground, infiltrating and corrupting our way of life. Okay? In fact, such obliviousness of the obvious is *exactly what the alien invaders prefer that we manifest as they study the geographic, technological, and social-psychical features of our planet and continue with their invasion plans*. The absence of human interference with their plans to conquer all humanity only makes it even *easier* to put those human-conquering plans into motion! Duh! I mean, Jesus. Put on your thinking caps, people. Because that's the only way we will have even a vanishingly small chance of defeating these omnipotent alien flitters.

I mean, who gives a gosh darn where the aliens *come from*, whether it be Mars, Jupiter, Pluto, Alpha Centauri, or some other rockhole? *The point is, they're here, and*

*that's what matters. That's the point.* And it matters that that's the point. *It really, really does.* I can't stress this enough. *I just can't.*

## CHAPTER NINE

BEELZEBUB WILLIS POSSESSED AN EXHAUSTIVE KNOWLEDGE of plumbing fixtures and alien invaders. “And then...and then...a big green tentacle comes snaking out of the....”

“That’s great, Zub. Just give me a minute to find my notebook.”

“Hurry, Great One! We’ve got to get going!” He was jumping up and down on the mattress with untrammelled exuberance.

Hadn’t we been going for two hours?

“And put on some underwear, please. At least.”

“Great One!” He screamed at the ceiling. “Great One!”

“Cripes.”

“I don’t have any underwear!”

“Well, then, pants. Put some pants on.”

“We have to *hurry!*”

“All the more reason for clothing, nyet?” I wheezed. Beelzebub Willis had stopped hopping and had started struggling to insert himself into a pair of 1950s Lee dungarees of the type typical of our era. But he was having trouble buttoning the fly.

“Great One! Help me!”

“I’ve helped you enough. Once again: where are we going?”

“I told you! Wisconsin! That’s where the aliens are converging, Great One, according to my information! I have a contact there!”

“I suppose we need to contact him.”

“He will give us details! Oh Gawd sir, help! Help me, Great One!”

“As I’ve tried to tell you....”

“You’re that great! You are! Oh Gawd! Oh Gawd!”

Wisconsin. I had been traveling non-stop since the moment Hippenthwaite had sent me on this phantasmagoric journalistic voyage. And now, if I permitted this man-child to lead me, I would be rushing off to yet another goddamn state nobody ever heard of.

All in a good cause, I told myself. Gotta keep investigating. The aliens would love it if you lapsed into weary inertness and failed to get the scoop about how their vanguard was tumescing for the final push of Project Earth Conquer. Fine, fine, I answered myself inside my head. Wisconsin it is.

I regarded Beelzebub. “We really must do something about that.”

“Oh thank you, Great One!”

## CHAPTER TEN

WISCONSIN WAS JUST AS DREARY AND nondescript a patch of the map as I had expected. A land full of husbands hammering fluted masonry nails and wives hosting Tupperware parties and vacuuming in a spiral starting in the center of the carpet. The Wisconsinites all lived in houses made of tacky tacky and all their houses looked just the same. Everybody we met offered us milk and cheese, probably spiked with some kind of hypnotic formula designed to turn us into Wisconsinites.

"No thank you," I said.

"But it's really a wonderful cheese," gushed US 51 Diner's milk-jug-shaped waitress, Stacy.

"I'll have some!" Beelzebub yelped. "Lay it on me, ma'am!"

"Jesus fucking Christ," I said.

Stacy looked startled. "Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem," I said, sighing some more.

"Well, you'll have the cheese in a jiffy. But please, sir, if there is a problem, tell me about it without the cuss words and without taking the Lord's name in vain. We don't take kindly to that sort of thing around here. That's not how I was brought up. Maybe you was brought up different, but that's not how I was brought up. Okay. I've said my piece." She waddled off.

"Wait until you're conquered by aliens from outer space," I muttered. "Then you'll have real problems."

Beelzebub threw an arm over my shoulders and peered deeply into my green-flecked hazel eyes with his brightly eager cerulean eyes. "Is everything okay, Great One?" he whispered urgently, kindly, hornily. "Have you ever even *tried* Limburger cheese? Why don't you just *taste* it."

Omigod. Was Beelzebub Willis one of the aliens? Or, worse, a Wisconsinite?

"Let's just contact this contact you've been jabbering about," I said, rising from the lavender 1950s-shaped booth table. "There is no need to waste our time eating cheese, especially with the fate of all humanity at stake. I hope your man's information is worthwhile."

"Worthwhile? Oh Gawd! Jeeves has the most information that's the most worthwhile, Great One! He knows how to find the aliens and how to stop them! You'll see!"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

WE HOPPED BACK INTO MY GRIME-RIMED Ford Thunderbird and proceeded to Exit 13, then followed dirt roads until we reached a knotty clapboard house plunked like an exhausted toad in acres of blankness. Perhaps the grass was a feature, but it was the kind of grass that fades out of the picture even as you're looking at it. Even the mosquitoes were listless and without ambition. And forget about the grasshoppers.

The rusty screen door rattled when we knocked on it, and chips of dirty paint from the main door shivered and cracked off. We also tried the doorbell.

Soon enough, a portly, balding, trench-coated fellow came to the door, opened the door, glared at us, and ushered us into his home. We were mutely bidden to take seats at the kitchen table. Then our host fetched a couple of cans of Coca Cola from the refrigerator and plunked them in front of us. Using all fingers of both hands, Jeeves indicated each can simultaneously and bellowed: "Eat!"

In response to this injunction Beelzebub emitted an almost hysterical sound that was half laugh and half snort, looking at me as if to say, hey, told you he was weird. Except that—as I endeavored to sternly communicate via return glance—Beelzebub had told me no such thing. Well, I *would* have if it had ever *come up*, he glance-replied, in a naked appeal to my forbearance and understanding.

"You *drink* soda, you don't eat it," I explained to our host. "But perhaps you are still learning the niceties of the Earth language we call English. On your planet, do you use different words for different kinds of consumption, or the same word for all of them?"

"Oh Gawd, you're an alien!!!" Beelzebub shrieked, as all the dots floating around in his brain having to do with the strange creature that called itself Jeeves suddenly merged, gelled, and exploded. "Oh Gawd, there *are* aliens from outer space!!! Oh Gawd!!!"

"Stupid humans, shut up!" Jeeves ordered, demonstrating his mastery of at least a few of our native words. From somewhere he produced two sets of handcuffs and thrust them at us, also thrusting two suddenly manifested tentacles simultaneously in the way he had done when gesturing at our sodas. Again I was the beneficiary of what the left limb was doing, Beelzebub of the right limb. The handcuffs clattered in front of us.

"I don't think we're going to shackle ourselves," I said.

"No way are we!" squealed Beelzebub. "Screw you and screw your handcuffs, space alien! Humans are free beings of the universe!" Beelzebub was obviously not remembering his Rousseau. "How could you have deceived me the way you did, Jeeves? Are all aliens nothing but asshole liars?"

"Stupid human, shut up," Jeeves said, more wearily this time. Beelzebub does tend to grind you down after a while. "Don't repeat myself make me. The now on handcuffs put."

"He's not an alien, he's a German," I said.

"Screw you, Nazi alien!" Beelzebub said. "And screw your handcuffs! We are the slaves of no man! Or creature! No man or creature!"

Jeeves removed a small gray cube from a shirt pocket, pointed it at Beelzebub. What was it...pepper spray? —Yes, such was the vague notion that flashed inconsequentially through my brain, soon to vanish forever until resurrected in this sentence as Beelzebub lurched toward the alien to strangle him and a narrow beam of white light flashed out of

the cube and turned Beelzebub into a puddle of smoky, bubbling, bloody, ashen black-and-red goo.

“So that’s what a ray gun looks like,” I said. I spoke these inappropriate words with a stupid bravado so as not to scream. But I could not avert my gaze from the present form of what had been Beelzebub Willis.

“Handcuffs,” Jeeves said.

“Okey-dokey.” I snapped on the cuffs.

My brave prophylactic against tears wasn’t working. Apparently the space aliens’ manual on conquering humans had told them what the wet stuff meant; the alien observed me for a moment, then consolingly explained, “Usefulness he outlived. Obstruction gained ek plurg mimsy floop. Hope you understand.”

Oh. Okay then.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

“OUT. LEFT. GO. STOP. GO. TURN. Other. Up. Down. Turn. Move. Faster. Faster. Stop. Go. Vite! Schnell! Schnell! Schnell!” He kept poking me with his sharp-tipped tentacles in ways that inflicted bruises and wounds, for example to my spinal cord, shin, stomach, sternocleidomastoids and left eyelid.

At last, the alien from outer space known as Jeeves had guided me to a small desolate parking lot just off of a lonely country road. In this parking lot sat a sombrero-shaped Edsel with a puffy, fuzzy, blurry, indistinct, only quasi-perceivable exterior. Into this sad shape he shoved me, and therein lay I prone and bleeding in a strangely curving, cushionless, weirdly glowing back seat.

“What are you doing, asshole?” I inquired.

“Huh? Assho my name isn’t.”

I tried to sit up. One of his tentacles lashed out from under the trench coat and slapped me in the face, hard. Then, again, harder. Then harder still. It was a revelation. Who knew that tentacles could hit so hard?

“Uncle!” I cried. “Uncle! Uncle! That’s an Earthling code word for ‘I surrender!’ I wasn’t resisting you so I don’t know why I have to surrender! But I do! If I had a white handkerchief I’d wave it!”

“Pleesh mishyer, just to let me to just get you to Station”—I think he said “Qzykwvzu,” or some Scrabble-winning word like that. “—Station Qzykwvzu. Until behave then or die,” he added apologetically. “I like Ike,” he concluded.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, is this one of the flying saucers?” I screamed as the rotation velocity of the hysterically oblate spheroid Edsel in which he was kidnapping me suddenly mega-tupled, causing the vehicle to zoom straight up into the clear sky, the great blue yonder, the vast limitless that is the subject of so much idiotic soaring poetic fancy. My spyglass to the world was an orange-cellophane-covered porthole about a foot in diameter, through which I could just make out that we were flying above a withered cornfield in which a bearded farmer, yea high, a little pot-bellied ant in lapsed overalls, was staring up at us, looking terribly stunned. The sheep he was screwing looked, if anything, even more stunned.

So it was true. I was in the sinister clutches of a multi-tentacled alien from outer space! The flying saucers are real, I realized. *They are very very real!*

My only hope was that the single eyewitness to my abduction would report what he had seen, and that, in consequence, the police, military, etc. would not rest until they had learned what it was all about and had mounted an operation to rescue me from the all-powerful aliens!

And if I believed that that would ever happen, I had a bridge to sell me. I was doomed. Doomed.

Enjoy, sheep! While you can!

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"ARE WE THERE YET?" I ASKED.

"Are we there yet, are we there yet," mimicked Jeeves. "Only have we scoodle more bleepnons to go. Patience, stupid human."

"Your English is still less than adequate. Perhaps I should tutor you."

"Moronic, I can speaketh nine hundred of your Earth languors. Mayhap I you tootle should, how vis-à-vis that?"

"Pass."

"That's what I bought."

"Are you trying for 'That's what I thought'?"

"No tootling!"

I'd have said plenty more to the bald multi-tentacled creature had I not been weary, terrified, and unable to think of anything more to say.

On and on we sped through space. The porthole was useless now. Every once in a while I looked through it to confirm that everything outside was as black and blank, albeit orange-tinted, as ever. Aren't you supposed to see stars as you're traveling through space? Something?

At long last I felt the vibrations, torque, shuddering, and gravid weightiness that signified that we were entering the gravity and atmosphere of a large astronomical body.

"Okety-dokety," Jeeves said, as he slapped and yanked at various ferns and weeds of the instrument panel. At least I think it was an instrument panel. I don't really know for sure. He was either gardening, having sex, or landing his fuzzy-Frisbee-shaped spaceship. As we approached what I supposed to be the surface of a planet, the sensation of whirling-like-a-flying-saucer increased. We thumped. All was quiet. I was about to try the line about Toto we're not in Kansas any more when Jeeves turned to speak.

"Sorry vis-à-vis your injuries, stupid," he began, unlocking the handcuffs. "We have Station Qzykwvzu reached. You are about to meet our Central Nexus 4-B Guy. He examine you close will. Use the respect and the deference-making or die. Me you follow."

Always a charmer that one.

A ramp spat out of the side of the spaceship. Jeeves moved fast. I sighed. This was the moment, was it not, to take control of the alien spacecraft before the slow-witted omnipotent alien could realize what I was doing and scurry back? Except that Jeeves had apparently forgotten to leave an English-language version of the pilot's manual lying around and opened to the page with simplified instructions for emergency takeoffs and for reconfiguring ship systems to conform to human needs and abilities.

Reluctantly, I followed my rude captor out of the flying saucer.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

STATION QZYKWVZU OR PLANET QZYKWVZU OR wherever we were did not impress me as being especially exotic.

All I could see was a blank blacktop, a kind of infinitely stretching New Jersey parking lot without cars. In the distance, a figure approached. It looked humanoid. At least, I could not see any tentacles slithering around. Then the blankness got blanker. I had barely glimpsed my new surroundings before I was falling to the ground. Gasping. For. Air. Oh. No. This. Is. It. I thought of Doris, of Bret, of a little puppy I had owned for three weeks as a child. All I could dredge up from my whole life. Jeeves or somebody had seen fit to oxygenate the atmosphere of the little area of the spaceship to which I had been confined, but not to oxygenate the atmosphere of my immediate environment once I had exited the vehicle. Or maybe Jeeves was just being sadistic, for he immediately yanked me up by my collarbone and slapped a wet sponge over my face. "Here, stupid, face to this press or die," he explained. "Gwed," I said, obscurely.

The shape of the approaching Qzykwvzunian became distinct and proximate. A standard-looking, blandly personable humanoid attired in a bespoke Savile Row three-piece getup with plush tweed accents and a subtle bouquet.

"Jolly good, jolly good," he effused, advancing to clutch at me with both hands, like a politician. With one hand he gripped my right hand and with the other my right forearm as I used my left hand to press the life-giving sponge to my face. The alien was hurting my arm and fingers. We made eye contact. His eyes were the exact shade of brown of a child's watercolor choice for bark-less tree trunks. A vacantly handsome face, indeterminately young, that of a man in his twenties or early thirties but evincing no detectable past. "You can drop that silly wad now." He winked. I hesitantly removed the sponge from my lips. Had I been hallucinating the apparent lack of breathable air? Or was I hallucinating now about the presence of breathable air? Or had the air been "turned on"? Could aliens from outer space do that? Was there anything that they couldn't do? Was there any point in asking these questions? Especially if I were not going to ask them out loud?

Jeeves rattled off a series of alternatively harsh and sibilant noises, with a few diphthong things that sounded like French vowels being contorted even more than usual.

"Now, now, none of that," said the other. "We have nothing to hide from our human friend here. We will bloody well communicate in the human tongue that he knows." The newcomer turned his head slightly to address me. "My subordinate is saying that you do not hail from London. My understanding had been that we were going to pick up a chap from London. I do so enjoy a nice tea time, with scones, and I am a great fan of lifts, bowlers and water closets. But, happily, you meet our other specifications to a fare-thee-well. I am Central Nexus 4-B Guy. And you are....?"

He lifted an eyebrow, a gesture that looked as if it had been practiced in front of a mirror.

"I am Intrepid Investigator Guy," I said. "Also known as The Great One."

"Wonderful, wonderful. Oh I am so glad. This is really a pip. We really did want to talk to one of the very most important persons on Earth, and you are clearly one of them."

"I wouldn't say that."

"And modest too! Wonderful. Oh this is capital. I am so glad. I really am."

“It’s a pip.”

“A pip! Oh yes. *Bravo*. Now you’re talking, old boy.”

I hoped he wasn’t going to throw an arm around me and start to reminisce about Eton.

“Can we get down to business here?” I asked, my impatience finally if marginally surging to greater strength than my quivering terror, because of how I was so intrepid and everything. “Where am I? What am I doing here? What are your intentions toward my planet? Will I ever be returned to Earth, or am I doomed to be either burnt to a crisp or talked to death on this boring-looking tarscape?”

“Eh? What’s this? Have you not been properly briefed en route? Oh, bad show! This won’t go. This won’t go at all. Jeeves, I am so very disappointed in you. Why have you not fulfilled your duty in this matter?”

Jeeves, if that was his real name, began hissing, screeching, cawing and strangling vowels as was the wont of the alien mode of communication, but his explanation got cut off.

“No, no. English, please, Jeeves. I absolutely insist upon that, and you’d better jolly well comply, hadn’t you?”

“He too much dipshit fuckwad talk to to to. To. Impossible human stupid one. With always stupid jokes. Uncommunicatableistic.”

“You see what I have had to deal with here, Central Nexus 4-B Guy,” I put it to him. “Not only is this chap’s grasp of the King’s English sub-abysmal, but he also possesses no courtly graces whatever. You can observe the wounds that have been inflicted upon me, incurred merely because I did attempt some inter-species diplomacy—with respect to which you can observe that he is no adept. All he ever told me was that he was taking me to ‘Station Qzykwvzu,’ I hope I haven’t mispronounced it. At the risk of verbosity, I should also add that Jeeves here murdered a friend of mine before my eyes, incinerated him with his ray gun, for no good reason at all given the power Jeeves had over us; and that J-boy’s subsequent words of regret were empty and formulaic at best.”

Central Nexus 4-B Guy looked shocked and angry. It was impossible to tell whether the emotions were real. But he spoke very sternly as he now addressed his colleague: “You told him the name of our sector base platform?”

“They local designated star map no have dumb human no stellar exploration no focused weaponry potent!”

“Even so, this is an outrageous breach of protocol,” Central Nexus 4-B Guy admonished.

“What about how he ray-blasted my friend?” I ventured.

“His friend so-called bitch insubordinate me attacked! Ray-blasting only option was you know! I like Ike!”

“Oh, so there’s no lower setting on your ray guns?”

Central Nexus 4-B Guy raised a patient but firm hand. “Let’s resolve this like fellow sentient beings, shall we? Great One, would you feel better if you could incinerate Jeeves for incinerating your fellow Earthling and for revealing the name of our sector base platform? Would that resolve the matter to your satisfaction?”

Jeeves squawked unintelligibly, but I knew what he was saying without a translation.

“Sounds like a trick question,” I said.

Central Nexus 4-B Guy pulled a small gray cube from a vest pocket and proceeded to extend his velvet-jacketed arm toward me. “Very well then, go for it.”

For the rest of my life I will always, always, always, always wonder what would have happened had I accepted the gray-cube ray gun.

Of course I did not accept the cube. Did I even know how to operate the cube? I did not. It lacked even a thwicking and snicking rotary dial mechanism. What if I did the wrong thing and incinerated myself by mistake? A person can't recover from that sort of error. Suppose I did manage to slagify the both of them instead of myself. Then what? All the other aliens from outer space, wherever they were, would still be out and about. And I still had no actionable intelligence regarding the aliens' intentions, strategy and goals. Also, how could I ever get home without the help of my captors? The other aliens probably wouldn't appreciate my having ended the existences of two of their colleagues.

So, no, I did not go for it.

After a long, tense pause, Central Nexus 4-B Guy slowly, ever so slowly—as if time itself, Saran-Wrap-like, were clinging to itself and getting snagged, straightening itself out, getting snagged again—withdrew the open-palmed hand with which he had been proffering the cube, aimed the cube at Jeeves, and pressed whatever counted as a trigger. I cannot describe the blob of steaming iridescent pus that resulted, partly because I am not that good at describing steaming iridescent pus—never had much practice at it—but mostly because the pus quickly sank into and was absorbed by the black-tar-like ground underneath. It was as if Jeeves had never existed, which is really the best way to remember him.

Much as I had learned to hate the rude and murderous creature during the brief time of our acquaintance, I felt no satisfaction at his demise but, again, only the saturating fear that comes from knowing how casually and without compunction these aliens from outer space were willing to snuff life, even their own.

“Satisfied?” Central Nexus 4-B Guy asked.

“I can't say that I am.”

“Blimey, what is it with you humans?”

“Look, I'm sure you can imagine how unusual and intimidating, and even alarming, this situation must be for me.”

“Oh dear. Of course. How thoughtless of me. You'll be wanting a spot of tea next, I expect?”

“Actually, I have to go the bathroom.”

“Are you employing the euphemism for excreting?”

“I am. It would be nice if there were an actual bathroom to repair to, the door to which could be closed.”

“Be my guest.”

“Right, uh, now?”

“Fine, fine.”

“So, uh, no privacy?”

“Uh, no.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“UH, WHAT ARE YOUR INTENTIONS TOWARD my planet? The briefing that you talked about.”

“Oh but of course! You mustn’t think us coy. But you are already pretty well informed on this, are you not? You are one of the top news-tellers on your planet. You have been doing that rock-’em sock-’em series for *Super-True Blasto Investigations*. Our nefarious schemes can be no secret to *you*.”

“So...it really is an invasion, then?”

“My dear boy, what else *could* it be? This is what we alien invaders *do*, do we not?” Central Nexus 4-B Guy scratched his left cheek with his left index finger and his right cheek with a right index finger. He steepled his fingers, unsteeped them, resteepled them. Whoever 4-B modeled himself after is not my friend.

“You’re not fooling with me?”

“We really do plan to conquer the human race. Scout’s honor. The only question is what form the conquest will take. Will it be gradual, with courses conducted in hopes of rectifying the misguided thought on your planet; or just, you know, splat, solve the problem once and for all?”

“But—but why? What have we ever done to you? How are we a ‘problem’?”

Central Nexus 4-B was silent for a moment. I might have inferred that he was ruminating were his blank countenance not so unvarying. It does seem to me that the only reason one ever pauses for such a long time in the middle of an unconcluded conversation is to ruminate. But I am no expert in xeno-psychology.

“It is not so much what you humans have done as what you have shown yourselves unable to do. Your species fails so miserably in certain tasks that it cannot be allowed to probably muck up the rest of the galaxy within a few million years at the latest. Hope you understand.”

“How would our mere inferiority muck up the galaxy? Isn’t it a big galaxy?”

The conqueror sighed extravagantly. “How can one explain things to a member of a species congenitally incapable of seeing things for what they really are, or unwilling to see things for what they really are?”

I could have done without the supercilious condescension.

“Try us. Try me, Central Nexus 4-B Guy. I mean, as long as you’ve brought me all this way.”

“Explain the way things really are to you? My dear chap. Human beings don’t possess the faculty, or so you yourselves contend.”

“How do you mean?”

He waved a hand. “You are acquainted with your own culture and history? You must be aware that despite your great genetic gifts, the human condition is one of self-imposed cognitive impoverishment. The beings of my worlds have never before encountered such a willfully self-neutering species. Like you, my people and all the other peoples of the galaxy possess the means of perceiving and conceptualizing reality. Unlike you, we do not insist that we lack these cognitive faculties. On the other hand, you humans, by your own insistent report, can or will see only the so-called ‘appearances’ of things and so cannot grasp anything as it is ‘in itself.’ Nobody wants to deal with a race thus self-stunted in cognition. It is just so ludicrous, you know. The only alternatives are to either

squash you like a bug or reeducate you. This is the great debate that we aliens from outer space are having at the moment. Meantime, we are reconnoitering your planet.”

“You’re debating what method of conquest, not whether to conquer.”

“Exactly. Some of us say, ‘Just go ahead with the conquest before the humans realize what’s happening. Smash them.’ Others say, ‘No, let’s take as much time as we like to fully assess the situation. Given the self-imposed inability of the humans to perceive the nature of things, they will never ever realize that when they see spaceships from another world, what they are seeing is, in fact, spaceships from another world. They are determined to be non-cognitive, after all.’ ”

“I think you’re misunderstanding something, 4-B. I don’t know what your sense organs might be. We human beings have at least five. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin. We can see, hear, smell, taste, feel. We can also sense the relative positions of parts of our body and of our bodies as a whole. We can tell what things are, that some things are cows, other things are grass or moon or tractors. We can form concepts of things that are similar enough to be regarded as being in the same class, and different enough from other members of a wider class to be distinguished from those other members; and on the basis of recognizing such similarities and differences we can use our reasoning ability to investigate reality further using our concepts.”

“And what is it that you claim to be perceiving when you perceive, or conceiving when you are conceiving, if I may be so bold?”

“Reality! Its constituents! Entities! Features! Relationships! Of course we make mistakes. And sometimes the evidence is incomplete. And some people do reason pretty badly. But we can gather more evidence and rethink things.... It seems incredible to me that you seem to require omniscience as the price for being left alone. Do you aliens from outer space know everything instantaneously and without any cognitive processes? I mean....”

“Oh no! Oh *no*! Not at all, you human. We aliens from outer space have the cognitive processes too. Our cognition is not infallible. We are not gods, after all, although I suppose it must seem so given humankind’s primitive progress and rather feeble technological efforts to date.”

“Now that seems kind of...”

“My point is that despite all human efforts through the ages, some of them quite valiant, according your own most heralded philosophical accounts, you don’t really know anything. Not about *reality*, my dear chap. Your most honored sages are extraordinarily insistent on this point, no matter what else they may disagree about.”

“Well—”

“But let me continue.”

“But, but, okay, sure, I grant you that not everybody on Earth acknowledges the facts of our ability to know explicitly, and that many academic bums make a living out of casting doubt upon about our ability to perceive and conceive and be logical and be aware of reality.... But most people *act* as if what they are dealing with is real and as if they are competent to deal with it. I mean, just as a practical matter, verbalizations aside. Otherwise we could not sustain our civilization.”

“Your continuously self-immolating civilization? You’re now doing the world wars.”

“Okay.” It was true. We had just done a big world war. Tens of millions dead.

“Your intellectuals say that all that anybody can perceive is sequence or juxtaposition, not cause and effect, so that there’s no reason to think you’ll see the dawn tomorrow simply because you saw it today; or else that the human mind via unknowable preconscious structures imputes time and space and causality to things, so that so far as you know there aren’t any time and space and causality except as constructs of mind; or that contradictions are in the very nature of things, that reality is all a kind pulsing dialectic of identities and their coexistent opposites. Now, obviously, contradictions are not in the nature of things. Things just are what they are, and can’t be other than that. It is so dashed annoying to have to explain this sort of elementary thing to anybody when any entity presents itself to any conscious organism’s awareness as being only what it is, you know.”

“You’re talking about...about philosophers...Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel and suchlike...but these guys are the idiot savants of humanity! You can’t treat the worst of their blathering as typical of human epistemology!”

“But many others of you—I mean non-philosophers now—do assert that there is some other realm in which the really real things reside, a realm other than the reality around you. You refer to a ‘super-nature,’ which is often called heaven or hell, somehow beyond or behind all that which they do perceive. Is this not so?”

“Oh, well, but that kind of thing—religion is what you, mean, right?—that’s marginal these days. That’s Sunday school stuff. We aren’t in the Middle Ages any more. At least not in the West.”

“So you say, Great One, and I suppose human beings are not unanimous in insisting that all you can perceive are perceptions, not the objects of perception; or that there must be some kind of inaccessible and unknowable ‘noumenal’ reality underlying the perceivable world, or that the perceptible world is just a subjective construct, or a faded mirror of that which really and truly but imperceptibly exists. Nor do we aliens from outer space assume unanimity of opinion among humans. But, blimey, you must admit that—”

“You can’t accept the philosophers’ abstruse babblings as some kind of index of human thinking about these things!”

“Did you just interrupt me again?” Slowly and disapprovingly, Central Nexus 4-B Guy shook his head.

“Uh...”

“I’d hate to have to incinerate you before I’m done with you.”

“Uh...uh....” I waited for 4-B to speak. My tongue was dry anyway. Let him have the floor.

“As I was saying,” Central Nexus 4-B Guy said, “it’s not as if your human philosophers just go off into a corner to do their babbling, unheeded by the rest of you. Nor do you lock them up in one of your insane asylums for people with deviant opinions. Do you?”

“Not usually. Well, sometimes. It depends which country and which historical era, the sort of power struggles going on, who is touchy about what, so forth.”

“The major works of philosophy are taught to all of your most inquiring human minds. When these persons do neglect to read the treatises of the philosophers, they feel guilty about having failed to read them. So they try to at least read summaries and outlines. Moreover, all the human religions and cults insist on how inaccessible ultimate



reality is to human minds, so that you must seek a mystic access to the 'true' presumably inaccessible to your mere senses and cognition. Almost all the intellectual guides put out by you humans say the same thing. Your editorials are chock full of the stuff as well. There's no use protesting that we space aliens haven't got it right. We have been studying you for quite a long time, my dear boy: almost nine years now. The briefings we get about these intellectual-cultural manifestations are very comprehensive. I can say with confidence that we have thoroughly examined all your cultural outputs. But I see that I have been monopolizing the floor. Did you want to say something? By all means. I didn't really mean that crack about incinerating you, you know."

"You're my first alien encounter. It's hard to gauge these things."

"I quite understand."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“YOU KNOW, 4-B, SOME PEOPLE THINK THAT unidentified flying objects aren’t really what they seem to be. That is, that they aren’t really the fuzzy Frisbees or airplane lights and so forth. They think that these phenomenal manifestations conceal what the things are ‘in themselves,’ namely: visitors from outer space.”

“Oh good! Oh capital! *We’re* the noumena! Bravo! Oh, that’s *excellent!*” 4-B seemed genuinely delighted.

“Thanks.”

“I do love a good paradox. But you do understand what I am getting at, I hope—at least you, The Great One, must.”

“I have a confession. I’m really not that great.”

“Give yourself a little credit, my good man! Don’t listen to the naysayers!”

“Okay.”

“Let me tell you one of the best human tips I’ve come across. When you find yourself feeling doubt, or woe, or angst, get into the habit first thing in the morning of placing yourself in front of a mirror and saying aloud, in a vibrant, cheery, *confident* voice, ‘Every day in every way, I feel happy, I feel healthy, I feel terrific.’ And then *smile*. Physically smile. Exercise that zygomatic major muscle! I understand it works wonders for mind and body. Just that one simple transformative incantation, plus contorting the lips in a vibrant upward vector.”

“Okay.”

“I find it works wonders, myself,” said Central Nexus 4-B Guy with a Pan-Am smile.

“Uh....”

“But to continue. No theoretic weight can be accorded to the fact that you humans may stumble upon the truth by way of treating everything you see as a lie,” 4-B continued as his countenance reverted to its former blankness. “No matter what kind of gloss you wish to impart to it, you must see, don’t you, how anti-galactically perverse it is to regard everything you see as a mere perceptual ‘representation’ that veils ‘true reality’? Do you know how many intellects on your planet have believed that it is legitimate to doubt their own senses because the light from a pencil is refracted when it is plunged in water? They say, ‘Oh look! The pencil appears to have bent at the surface of the water! It appears discontinuous! But it isn’t really bent or discontinuous, is it? Ergo, my senses fail me!’ You do understand what I am talking about, all this sort of piffle...? You must, if you have perused any of the standard skeptical works distributed on your planet.”

“You have a point there, Central Nexus 4-B Guy. But none of these intellectual tendencies has been safe from criticism.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Just one example, Aristotle criticized Plato’s notions of Forms or Ideas. Both mystics and skeptics have been criticized by defenders of objective conceptualization. Not everybody believes that existence consists of mirages or that dreams invalidate the evidence of the senses. Not everybody after Kant believes that unknowable features of mind impose time and space and causality and unity and plurality on the world of appearances, or that there is a necessary rift between the world of ‘appearances’ and the

world of ‘things in themselves,’ or that it is possible to have any knowledge independent of our sensory experience of the world.”

“I don’t dispute you.”

“Kant was responding to Hume, and Hume’s skepticism about cause-and-effect was unjustified to begin with.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” the alien said. “We aliens from outer space would never be tempted by the Humean skepticism or by contorted Kantian constructs offered in pseudo-solution to pseudo-problems. These are specifically human perversities.”

“Okay. But you’re discounting the fact that some of us also engage in sound theorizing. Some of dispute claims based on arbitrary constructs. Moreover, in daily life, everybody does in fact assume that the sun will come up, and that the creatures that appear to be jackrabbits are in fact jackrabbits, not merely a Kantian ‘appearance’ revealing we know not what about jackrabbits-in-themselves. Human beings aren’t typically mired in either Humean skepticism or Kantian skepticism. So, I mean, there’s really no need to conquer the Earth at all.”

Central Nexus 4-B Guy nodded. “Well, as I believe I have conceded, perhaps not everybody on your planet spouts the same nonsense. On the other hand, it’s bloody well commonplace. Is Bertrand Russell supposed to be your main alternative to Kant? Or is the self-contradictory jabberwocky of Zen Buddhism supposed to be the saving grace of the Western thought-culture?”

“It’s not like any of these guys monopolize the intellectual field. Sure they’re influential, but...”

“Come, come now, who are the sensible philosophers on your planet? Veatch, Blanshard, a few other neo-Aristotelians like that? Whose utterances do not escape confounding problems of their own? One of your top post-Kantian cognizers, Hegel, argues that a thing can be and not-be at the same time and in the same respect. He says—now I think I’ve got this right—that being in its very being is essentially nothing, because the process of abstracting progressively strips entities of differentiating attributes, so that by the time one attains to Being in one’s conceptualization there’s nothing left, except that Being is still there along with Nonbeing. It’s part of an alleged transcendent dialectic, manifesting Absolute. This sort of fiddlyfoo is unknown where I come from. We do not need any thinkers to counter it because such things are never asserted to begin with. We base our theory on reality, we don’t project a reality to conform to our theory.”

“Well, I—”

“Getting back to Kant now. If you look at some of the assertions about categories and so forth in the *Critique*, they are really quite incredible. May I call your attention to the passage in which Kant avers that ‘certain of our cognitions rise completely above the sphere of all possible experience, and by means of conceptions, to which there exists in the whole extent of experience no corresponding object,’ and that considerations of these ‘seem to extend the range of our judgments beyond its bounds’? And this rot follows an earlier suggestion that although knowledge ‘begins with experience,’ it ‘by no means’ follows that all knowledge ‘arises out of experience.’ Kant also claims that knowledge may be a ‘compound’ of what we receive by the senses and what the faculty of cognition supplies, which addition ‘we cannot distinguish from the original element given by sense’ until a lot of hard thinking enables one to separate that noumenally-conferred part of the

compound. Which is somehow possible despite the inaccessibility of what he calls noumena. What do you make of that?"

"It's a pretty arbitrary construct," I allowed.

"Now, in your view, this Kant fellow doesn't mean simply that a concept permits us to rise above the level of percepts, by allowing us to organize and retain that data in conceptual form, does he? Or merely that some referents of concepts are not 'objects' in the sense of entities? It is not merely that it is possible to conceptualize attributes and relations and the like? No. What 'cognitions' 'rise above' is 'all possible experience.' Is that not what he is saying?"

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I THINK SO,” I SAID. I sighed.

I also said: “As far as I could make out, back in the days when I was masochistic enough to read him, Kant is saying that reality-as-it-is is unknowable, but also that pre-conscious mechanisms embedded in that noumenal reality somehow synthesize sensory inputs in such a way as to impose time, space, causality, all the constituents of judgment on those appearances. It’s an automatic process of which we are not aware. He is definitely not referring to automatic physiological means of integrating sensory data into unified perceptions. His claim is that the very order of the world-as-we-perceive-it—the phenomenal world, the appearances—is *constructed* by our minds. We don’t as such perceive the world. We subjectively create it. Now, how he could get any inkling of the noumenal rules and noumenal mechanisms of that constructive process, given the fact that they are, by his own account, a) not perceptible and b) that perceptions are by his hypothesis not forms of awareness of ‘things-in-themselves,’ I have no idea.”

“Your account is very similar to my own understanding of his work,” 4-B was gracious enough to say. “Despite our differences on various important questions, we’re also very simpatico in some ways.”

I was on a roll, so I kept rolling.

“Kant believes that his investigations support a positive answer to the question whether we can have knowledge ‘altogether independent of experience, and even of all sensuous impressions.’ This is what he calls ‘a priori’ knowledge, not to be confused with ‘empirical knowledge,’ or knowledge gained by experience.”

“Dashed silly!”

“So how could Kant even propose the possibility of any ‘knowledge’ of a ‘reality’ of synthesizing capacities of mind-in-itself or anything else in-itself, if we have no ability to perceive that unknowable reality as it is in itself? After doing a lot of stringent preliminary meditation, Kant, like Plato, must end up by getting what amounts to a revelation about the functioning of this unknowable reality. After all, he insists that no one can *perceive* the things-in-themselves. What we ‘perceive’ are only the allegedly category-molded phenomena, the alleged constructs.”

“Do go on.”

Going on, I said that to answer Hume’s skepticism, Kant had not needed to concoct an even more sweeping or perverse skepticism, but only needed to show that Hume’s was unjustified. Hume presupposed the validity of the law of identity even as he sought to deny it, ignored our ability to validly conceptualize what we perceive, and so forth. He couldn’t see labels with the words “identity” and “causality” taped to the acting entities of the world, so he complained that he saw no necessary connections in reality, just contiguity or sequence. But the laws of identity and causality are self-evident bases of knowledge, axioms implicit in all knowledge. You don’t need to prove what is self-evident, what is inescapably implicit in any perception. You need merely count on it, and, as a thinker, to conceptualize it. To reach any knowledge, indeed even to say anything at all, you must rely on the fact that things are what they are and act in accordance with their natures. We don’t perceive concepts. We do perceive entities that are what they, acting in accordance with what they are. And then we draw valid abstractions about identity and causality on this basis.

“Aristotle had some good stuff in response to skeptics,” I concluded. “He showed how skeptics had no choice but to implicitly affirm the axioms of knowledge even in the process of denying them. This unavoidability is what shows that they are primary in cognition, at the base of every act of knowing.”

I don’t know how I was managing to string all these words together even semi-coherently despite how tired and terrified I was and despite my not having cracked open a philosophy text in decades.

I guess the adrenalin triggered by the danger to mankind and to my own person had something to do with it. Lord knows I wasn’t the biggest fan of the peoples of Earth. But I didn’t want them to be enslaved or annihilated either. I wanted to save them. Save them from the anti-Kantian aliens from outer space. It was just lucky, I guess, that I had always been a man of sound epistemological principle, at least in the secret recesses of my mind if not always in journalistic practice. If you don’t start your cognitions with self-evident primaries, what are you going to start with? Unknowable noumena?

Central Nexus 4-B Guy nodded in vacant-smiley approval. “Right-o. Now, what do you make of Kant’s pronouncement that because ‘a certain form of sensuous intuition exists in the mind a priori which rests on the receptivity of the representative faculty (sensibility), the understanding, as a spontaneity, is able to determine the internal sense by means of the diversity of given representations, conformably to the synthetical unity of apperception, and thus to cogitate the synthetical unity of the apperception of the manifold of sensuous intuition a priori, as the condition to which must necessarily be submitted all objects of human intuition’? That is one of the more confounding sentences written by you Earthlings, in my experience.”

“Well, I don’t really understand it, but it sounds like more of the same. I don’t think you can really parse Kant when he’s going full-throttle.”

“Give it a go!”

“Well....” I was struggling now. Nothing can hurl you into a coma faster than a sustained bout of Kantian formulations. “It’s about how something a priori—which for Kant means prior to all experience—how something a priori is acting on fragmentary inputs from the external world so that we are confronted not with disintegrated slices of the world but with holistic perceptions. Perceptions of entities. Innate but unknowable mental confabulators filter or synthesize the data so that we recognize ‘objects of human intuition’ as unified entities, existing in time, existing in space, causally coherent, subject to logical judgment. According to Kant, the apparent unity or wholeness of the entities we see in the phenomenal world does not exist apart from our perception of these entities but rather emerges from the operation of the noumenal mind’s mechanisms for synthesizing that order; that’s the ‘cogitation of the synthetical unity,’ ‘or sensuous intuition a priori,’ I guess. It’s not the best sentence. Pick any five Kantian interpreters and they’ll all disagree with me in a different way.”

“Our researchers have found ten different PhD theses on just that one sentence.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do say!”

“My labors in the journalistic vineyard of such publications as *Super-True Blasto Investigations* have been the only way that my affection for a reality that I know to be directly accessible to our senses and conceivable by our minds could be daily affirmed,” I said for some reason.

“Commendable. Now, so far as you know, Great One, do any of the Kantians explain how the unknowable agencies of unknowable mind can be known to impose features of reality, a reality that could not exist or at least not be detected without this extra-physiological processing?”

“Not that I know of. Some of them try to rescue Kant from his worst inanities, but they never establish the link between what we ‘merely’ perceive, the world of appearances, and the ‘unknowable’ structures of mind that purportedly impose causality and the other organizing categories. In my view, the noumena and the categories and all the rest of it are just flatly arbitrary constructs. But the arbitrariness is obscured by layers of obfuscation uttered with an air of priestly authority.”

“Well, we aliens from outer space agree. In fact—and this is something you’ll appreciate, Great One—we have taken the trouble to take Kant’s full argument purporting to ‘elucidate’ or ‘demonstrate’ the noumenal apparatus and spun the full coiled explication through 95 quinquagillion alternate simulations. Each simulation is grounded in an at least 47%-defensible interpretation of the Kantian spewings, as articulated both in the original German and in translation. We have also articulated each simulation of the intellection in conjunction with a range of proposed salvaging premises. These salvaging premises in turn are derived from at least 47%-defensible interpretations proposed by post-Kantian revisionists, as well as by self-described anti-Kantians whose work nonetheless incorporates key Kantian assumptions.”

“Wow.”

“It took us six Earth days to run the simulations. And what do you think our results were?”

“No dice?”

“The simulations invariably spit up null. No matter what we try, never at any point does any plausible version of the argument establish a means of concluding anything about a so-called ‘unknowable’ realm allegedly molding a merely ‘phenomenal’ world that reveals nothing with certainty about what in fact exists.”

“Okay.”

“The argument implodes almost continuously, at every substantive inferential node. We tried to be as charitable as we could. We really did! When we started the simulations, we supposed that your Earthling intellectuals might be seeing something that we had missed. But it was just no go, you know.”

“Ninety-five quinquagillion iterations?”

“Not counting the simulations in which salvaging premises are adjoined.”

“Sounds like a lot.”

“It is.”

“I always knew that the Kantian ratiocination is bullshit. But I had no idea how many different ways it is bullshit.”

“Ah, if only all Earthlings were as sensible as you, my dear fellow, there’d be no problem! Then we would have no trouble welcoming you into the interplanetary comity. Absolutely.”

“So....”

“Yet all this anti-cognitive stuff proceeds unhindered on your planet. This is the problem. If somebody on our own planet were to start babbling in the Kantian mode—which has never happened, but if it did—we would remove the malfunctioning brain and

install a properly functioning brain. But on your planet, not only are the babblers left alone, other babblers pay them homage.”

“Well, I’d like to say that...uh, if I may?”

“Please.”

“Two things, Central Nexus 4-B Guy. We—that is, human beings—not all of us, but many of us, or at least a significant minority—believe in rights and freedom. We don’t believe that we must approve of everything a person says or does in order to respect his rights. So just because we disagree with somebody doesn’t mean we’re going to imprison them or kill them, or remove their brains, and so forth.”

“Oh. Yes. The Earthling political theories. I’ve read them. I take it that you prefer the doctrines advocating freedom and individualism, not the doctrines advocating tyranny and collectivism?”

“I would say so. Yes.”

“Hmm. No wonder you are so opposed to being enslaved by aliens from outer space!” Central Nexus 4-B Guy mused. “Well, it’s all very interesting, I must say.”

“Don’t forget that we also object to being annihilated.”

“I’ll make a note. What is your second point?”

“Just to stress again that many human beings, like me, dispute the skeptics. We know that things are what they are independent of our perception, and that perceiving things by a specific means, in a specific perceptual form, only reveals the world to us, doesn’t distort it. We regard the facts of existence and our awareness of existence as self-evident. We say that perception cannot fail to give us information about that which is being perceived; that there is nothing else for our senses to be giving us information about. Hearing, sight, smell, touch, taste could all tell me, by their separate means, that there’s a cake just out of the oven. These separate forms of sensory awareness don’t all give me the *same* information about the cake, but they also don’t contradict each other. Both touch and sight, for example, communicate the oblong shape of the cake, that it’s in a metallic container, perhaps aluminum, etc. Now, to be sure, if I misinterpret a perception, I might get a wrong idea about the object being perceived. But the perception itself isn’t misleading me. And it’s only on the basis of perception that I can correct any particular misinterpretation of any particular perception.”

“We agree! We absolutely agree. I have found the skeptics of your planet so frustrating. The doubts are so arbitrary.”

“So...I guess the biggest thing we’re not on the same page about is the matter of enslaving or destroying all mankind....”



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CENTRAL NEXUS 4-B GUY was not done.

For hours more as I blinked and sweated, every moment half-expecting to be reduced to slag, 4-B expatiated and inquired about the wayward peregrinations of Earth's idea-hatchers. For example, the Leibnitzian monads had not escaped his attention. "What does it even mean to say that simples can be conscious?" Nor had Berkeley's "esse est percipi"—the Latinate compactness of which 4-B appreciated if not the notion, i.e., that to be is to be perceived, not altogether unrelated to the later Kantian notion that to appear-to-be is to be constructed by unknowable pre-conscious appearance-enablers—eluded his gaze.

"What is it that awareness could be aware of, if aware of nothing but itself?" Central Nexus 4-B Guy wanted to know. "To be aware of oneself as being aware, one must first be aware of something, and by a specific means. When has self-consciousness preceded consciousness as such, in the history of organisms or in the life of a particular organism? Only after the organism sees can it realize that 'I am seeing!' What could generate an all-preceding state of awareness?"

"There is no answer, 4-B." Yes, we agreed with each other very much! If only we had met under difference circumstances and he didn't totally creep me out. We might have been friends.

"Consciousness is an attribute. Attributes of entities cannot subsist without the entities of which they are the attribute. Would you humans suppose that color can exist apart from any entity, apart from light, apart from anything? What about shape or heft? I would like to see an example of the self-shaping shape. It's jolly ludicrous. Ears, nose, eyes, these are physical means of perception. Yet your fantasists suppose that consciousness could exist without any physical means or physical organism."

Struggling to be participatory, I dredged up an example from popular literature. "Arthur C. Clarke wrote a novel, *Against the Fall of Night*, in which the various species of a galactic civilization work to create a—"

"Yes, I know that work. Yes! The civilizations Clarke describes are said to fashion a 'pure' consciousness that operates without any physical means, and would, supposedly, be therefore unburdened by the distorting sensory forms afflicting physical organisms. Not original with Clarke, of course. He was merely echoing the Kantian notion of perception as inherently disconnected from the object of perception. If I remember the story correctly, the consciousness without nature and without means of consciousness and without any intelligible motive nevertheless somehow and for some reason ravages the galaxy. Piffle."

"Piffle."

"A consciousness without any physical means of consciousness would not be conscious, let alone capable of affecting matter in any way, constructively or destructively."

"Quite. Quite," I said. "I guess what happens is that people get an idea and it strikes them as novel and interesting, and, especially if they're just imaginatively fooling around anyway, they get caught up in it and hammer out what they see as the implications without worrying too much about whether it's properly grounded...."

"Again, an understatement about your people."

“Well.”

Then Central Nexus 4-B Guy analyzed the analyses of linguistic analysts, the angst of the existentialists. He asked my opinion of J.M.E. McTaggart, but I did not know McTaggart. I agreed that if McTaggart believed that “nothing exists but spirit,” or that substance is infinitely divisible, he was in error, whatever the other merits of his views might be.

I did my best to agree with 4-B. When I did have an objection to propose, I demurred delicately or not at all.

I had to endure. So I endured. I persisted in matter and form. Stood straight, maintained a demeanor of unwavering attentiveness, spoke when politic to speak, remained silent when muteness seemed preferable. I had to survive. Had to save the Earth. The knees groaned. The sweat poured. I strove.

At last, 4-B reached the peroration. “And, therefore, I would have to say that am leaning against instant annihilation of humanity, myself,” he said concludingly.

“Good. Whew.”

“I admit that I am most curious to learn whether a more measured program of conquest and reeducation might not produce authentic universal acceptance among your people of the glaringly self-evident. The more I think about it, the more I tend toward the view that immediate annihilation is premature. Our conversation has certainly been very helpful. Yes. I’ll call Captain Zwerqzcklsdf and instruct him to defer the annihilation.”

Defer.

“Defer?”

“Defer.”

“You’re not taking into account the whole picture,” I yelped, or croaked. If a man dies of thirst on a blank alien tarmac, did he ever exist? “Why not a policy of *laissez faire* toward us? In light of all we that human beings have accomplished, what is to be gained by treating us as if only those promoting the most ill-advised ideas represent us all? We’re not a group-mind here. We’re many millions of separate individuals. A greater judiciousness—”

“Excellent! I cannot doubt that if I kept you here twenty or thirty of Earth years, you would be unstinting in your stalwart defense of your fellows. Oh *jolly* good! I suppose that for us to conquer humanity would be morally wrong, is that it? I confess that the arena of ethical inquiry remains a mystery to me, although I have read quite a lot of the contradictory human literature on the subject.”

“Glad you’re entertained. I don’t feel entertained. Not at all. I....”

“Oh no! Of course not! The fate of humanity hangs in the balance, all that sort of thing. Righto! Well, we shan’t persist in that mode then. Moving on....” He put a finger to his chin. “Let’s see....what information do you have about missile silos and troop movements? Also, what can you tell me about which key celebrities and military and political personnel are already zombie-like enough in personality so as to be easily replaced by human-looking aliens without anyone being the wiser, and so forth? Anything you could tell us along those lines would be helpful. We should be most grateful, *truly* we should.”

“Forgive me, Central Nexus 4-B Guy, but it sounds like you want me to help you conquer Earth. Is that why I’m here? I can’t be involved in anything having to do with Earth-conquering. I just can’t. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Have I committed another faux pas? The deuce! But look here, my dear chap; whether it’s conquest or annihilation we finally decide upon, it’s better for everyone on your planet if the undertaking proceeds with the greatest possible efficiency, inasmuch as our ability to triumph sooner or later is not in question. Give it some thought, will you?”

“I can’t help you. Even if I were some kind of military expert, which I’m not.”

“Oh dear. You *really* won’t help us either enslave or destroy your people? You’re *sure*, Great One?”

“I’m sure.”

“You understand what this means, don’t you?”

“My usefulness to you has been exposed for the sham that it is, and so you must incinerate me?”

“Well, we can’t exactly return you to Earth given what you now know about our plans—and now that you have had a first-hand glimpse of Station Qzykwvzu—can we, my good man?”

I almost laughed. “How can you be so smart and so dumb at the same time?”

“Care to rephrase that?” He smiled the polystyrene smile.

“You know damn well, Central Nexus 4-B Guy, that nobody on Earth will believe a word I say; not even the UFO kooks, bless them. And what actionable intelligence could I give anybody? Look for the blacktop? Fourth star to your right? I couldn’t even see any stars through the damn porthole on my way over.”

4-B took a moment to mull.

“Hmm. Was the porthole obscured during the whole of your trip here?”

“I did see some stuff on the ground before we left Earth altogether. But after that the porthole was useless. Nothing. Not the moon, not the sun, not a single star.”

“Hmm. And, of course, you could not have interpreted the instrument panel accurately, I suppose.”

“Not as it was in itself.”

“You know, I believe you. It is too bad that Jeeves is not here to support your testimony with his. But it would indeed have been standard protocol to polarize the porthole while transporting an Enemy of the Galaxy to the sector station.”

“I’m not sure that I—”

“Yes, yes, you’ve convinced me! Bravo again. I dare say, you are a most worthy interviewee! Lousy species in the aggregate, but some good individual variants. I suppose that I shall grant your wish to be returned to your planet so that you may in due course be either subjugated or destroyed, or both, in the company of your fellows. Who am I to stand in the way of an honorable if doomed gesture as prescribed by one or more of your planet’s ethical systems? I am eager to await the outcome. Go, go. Go and do what you can to stop us. Warn your fellow humans. Persuade them to erect a planetary force field, and to adopt a better epistemology, and so forth; do whatever else you think will help you. By all means.”

Central Nexus 4-B Guy turned and walked quietly away.

“Uh, is somebody going to give me a ride, or...?”

Three hours later, the sun came up, and the first car entered the lot.

You believe me, don’t you?

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

AFTER I HAD WALKED HOME AND drunk a glass of water in one of our 1950s-era glasses, I called Hippenthwaite. “Hey,” I said.

“Hey. Ho. Watcha got? Hot?” He sounded a little nervous.

“It’s hot. A lot. I’ve been kidnapped by an alien from outer space and had a meeting with one of the alien leaders about mumblety-mumble light years from here, over at one of their giant parking-lot type places. They want to conquer Earth because we have too many bad philosophical ideas, especially in the area of epistemology, or metaphysics of epistemology, or meta-epistemology, or whatever you want to call it.”

“Crazy!”

“Well, I’m serious, boss. I went with a young friend to meet a source who supposedly knew something about the aliens and their nefarious plans. Next thing I knew, this bald guy with tentacles had ray-blasted my friend, disintegrating him—horrifying thing—and was dragging me to his fuzzy spaceship. Turns out the blurry flying saucers really are blurry, that’s not just bad photography. Next thing I knew, I was many light years from Earth, standing in a giant nondescript empty parking lot—”

“Crazy!”

“And the guy, guy they call Central Nexus 4-B Guy—”

“Wild!”

“Um, so then—”

“Crazy! Wild!”

“Yeah. Uh. So I’m thinkin’, boss, two ways to go here. I could do a big first-person account of my terrifying adventure, with, you know, some background about all of my intrepid investigations leading up to the kidnapping. Or, maybe better, you could have one of your other investigative reporters interview me, asking what everyone wants to know. Either way, something boffo but credible, you know. Because this really happened, and we want to mobilize humanity about this. The aliens are very powerful, probably undefeatable from what I can tell. But it seems that out of self-respect we the peoples of Earth should at least try to defend ourselves. And maybe it would also be helpful if we run some sidebars next to publicize some of the better philosophical work being done, especially in epistemology along lines of perceptual realism, objective conceptions....”

“Outasight!”

“Uh...understand what I’m saying, boss? Based on what I was told and what I experienced, I’m pretty sure that these aliens are fully capable of—”

Blam! The door to my humble 1950s-era wattle-and-daub domicile splat-clacked open. Splinters of wood, gobs of clay and curls of rubber insulation strips flew in all directions and three flabby men with badges and hats tumbled into my living room, followed by four un-flabby, hatless other guys wearing bullet-proof vests and slinging Thompson submachine guns.

The trim quartet took up stations at every third vertex of a dodecahedron featuring me in the middle. All I could think was: “If I duck, they’ll shoot each other.” Then all I could think was: “But they’ve got those bullet-proof vests.” Then all I could think by way of addendum was: “But maybe they’ll go for a head shot. And bullet-proof vests aren’t

invulnerable anyway.” Then I thought: “And maybe they’ll aim down, at a slant, instead of straight across, horizontally.” It was like planning to steal a flying saucer.

“I gotta go,” I told Joe Purdy Bo Hippenthwaite, more calmly than I felt.

“Me too, you!” squeaked Hippenthwaite. Next things I heard were a click and a shrieking dial tone, as if the whole cosmos had been kicked in the groin, I guess by some bigger cosmos across the street. I let the handset drop. The dial-tone wailing desisted. Huh. If it’s that easy to get the universe to shut up, maybe it’ll be just as easy to handle the crazy situation in front of me, I wrongly thought.

One of the three potbellied hat-and-badge guys advanced a half-step toward me, flicked his badge more or less in the vicinity of my line of sight for an infinitesimal parcel of time, and barked: “Are you Mr.—” He uttered my distinguished name. “—the reporter (so-called) for *Super-True Blasto Investigations*?”

I raised my hands slowly over my head. “All the little cash I have is in the kitchen drawer just under and a little to the left of the sink. The bank is closed right now, so I—”

Another one of the potbellied men took three half-steps toward me, punched me in the stomach as hard as he could, and retreated three half-steps. “Don’t be a wisenheimer!” he snarled. (“Wisenheimer” is one of the kinds of words we use here in the 1950s.)

“Ouch,” I said. “Please don’t do that.”

“Let me handle this, sergeant,” the top man said. “Are you in fact the person I just asked whether you were?”

“I am,” I admitted.

“So-called reporter for *Super-True Blasto Investigations*?”

“The very same.”

“And do you know or did you know a small-town Wisconsin youth named Beelzebub Willis, of slight build and feverish demeanor?”

I couldn’t help feeling even soggier than I already felt at the mention of his name.

“I did,” I said.

I had an idea where all this was headed, but the threat posed by these men did not impress me. Perhaps I was in shock. Perhaps I was too concerned about the coming conquest or destruction of Earth to fear what these misled lawmen might do to me. I did wonder, vaguely, whether they could prevent me from telling the world what I knew and from urging the Earth people to do what they could to erect Earth-wide defenses against the aliens while also accepting more rational theories of knowledge.

“When was the last time you saw him?” the mean man rasped.

“Last night around 7:30, 8:00 p.m. when an alien from outer space, using a tiny cube-shaped ray gun, reduced him to a puddle of blood and ashes in the kitchen of a dilapidated Wisconsin farmhouse.”

“Slowly put your hands on your head. Turn around.”

I did so. He slapped a handcuff on one of my wrists, pulled my arms down behind my back, handcuffed the other wrist. The cold steel was too tight. It chafed. It pinched. It cut off blood flow. It existed! I existed!

“We are arresting you for the murders of Beelzebub D. Willis and Jim Jeeves.”

“May I correct just a few details? It was this ‘Jeeves,’ an alien from outer space, who murdered Beelzebub before abducting me in flying saucer and taking me to a surreal debriefing in a parking lot on another planet. Jeeves was then, in turn, murdered by

another one of the aliens. Then I was teleported in the twinkling of an eye to an identical-looking parking lot back here on Earth. Thus, I had nothing to do with the killings. In fact, I was opposed to them. Otherwise I have no quarrel with your account.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS ON A NARROW wooden plank in an ill-smelling cell in an ill-smelling jailhouse in a seedy part of town.

"You. Wake up!" barked a guard-like-looking person through a hole in the door as his mammoth key clicked and clanked in a mammoth rusty lock. "You been let go."

"I been let go?" I asked. "I'm not too sure about your grammar."

"You wanna stay and debate the niceties of syntax with me or you wanna make like a bird and hoof it?"

Before I could figure out a way to fly and trot simultaneously, the verbal lawman had shoved me out the jailhouse door and into the street, slamming the door behind me. Night had fallen. I intuited rather than sensed the malevolent figures skulking in the shadows. Curiosity and incipient relief about my release gave way to incipient fear.

"Excuse me, do you have a penny, sir?" a voice bellowed.

I whirled to confront an unwashed, emaciated fat man dressed in rags just as the breeze shifted, obliging me to also make acquaintance with his odor.

"I have many pennies," I said. "I'd be willing to give you some of them if you tell me where I am and how to get to Main Street and Seeley Avenue." This was the only intersection of town that I was sure everybody, even a bum, must know.

"This is the South Side, sir. Well, maybe it's more west than south, if we go strictly by cartographic reckoning. You could call it southwest. But by convention we here as well as all those elsewhere in town call this part of town the south side." He spoke firmly and almost angrily, as if I might challenge the communally agreed-upon designation.

"Very well." I threaded my way carefully. "Let it be the South Side. Now, which direction takes me toward Main and Seeley?"

"Main and Seeley?"

"I mean northeast. Going north and east from here. Sort of toward the center of town."

"Do you not know how to use the sun as your guide? Surely a person of your diction and cut of jib has been schooled in the fact that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. When the east is to your right and the west is to your left, you must be then be facing north, according to all the reigning conventions, which so far as I know are still applicable. Then the direction called 'south' is behind you."

I could see that the bum was a stickler for the linguistic conventions that facilitate both communication and travel.

I inquired: "Do I rightly assume that when you refer to the sun, you mean the giant fiery ball in the sky that the Earth in its rotation sometimes faces and sometimes not; and around which Earth revolves once a year?"

"Well," the bum said, "I hold no view on the important questions of whether the Earth rotates and whether the Earth revolves about the sun. I have not myself performed the necessary observations and analysis, for I am neither astronomer nor astronaut. Perhaps the Ptolemaic doctrine of epicycles is correct, and the sun and all the other orbs we see in the sky are revolving about this Earth. I do not know. I do not pretend to know. I do not commit myself. Indeed, I do my best to avoid the controversy altogether. I do not know, either, whether the sun will 'come up' tomorrow in any sense that I would care to endorse. But, sir, the sequence has been invariable in living memory. We have a habit of

expecting the sun to rise each morning, and I am a man of habit or I am no man at all. It would be an unlucky chance indeed if that orb were to deviate from its habitual path and pattern, just when you were needing its guidance most.”

“I indulge the same habit,” I replied. “But I cannot await the dawn before learning in which direction I should go in order to go downtown.”

“Your objection is sound.” The bum pointed. “That way. It is a twenty-minute walk, unless an earthquake occurs and you are buried under rock, or the Earth explodes, or some other catastrophe occurs. Perhaps molecules will lose their cohesion. Assuming molecules exist. I have never seen one.”

“Twenty minutes, you say?”

“It will take you five minutes or so to leave this part of town, which is full of dangerous persons lurking in shadows. I will accompany you until we reach the road alongside the highway. For these bullies are also cowards, and two persons make a harder target than one. Then all you need do is walk straight along that main road. I assume that the road will not reverse direction underfoot, taking you in the opposite direction unbeknownst to yourself. It is inanimate, so I do not suppose that it will.”

“I accept your kind offer.” I did not hesitate, for I believed that five minutes of his company was the lesser of two evils, and I always go for the lesser one.

He strode forth. I followed, ignoring as best I could various indistinct flutterings and ominous scrapings and clanks. Somebody tossing a garbage lid, or perhaps the wind was knocking it around. Was the object making the garbage-lid-like sound indeed a garbage lid, or did it merely sound just like one? Next came a shout of laughter, or maybe a rat squealing. A scraping of iron along brick. In the distance, a train rolled and groaned, its tooting horn faint but persistent. A street light hummed, blinked out, and after a few moments snapped back on as if it had been only cat-napping.

After we had been walking for a little while, the bum said, without turning his head: “Did you come from the jailhouse? I know that that is not the only possible explanation of your presence in this dubious neighborhood, but it is the first explanation that occurs to me given how I saw you leave the jailhouse.”

“I cannot deny it,” I said. To forestall further inferences, I added: “I have been accused of murder, but I am not guilty. And I have been released. I am not sure why. Perhaps I have been exonerated.”

The bum grunted.

“Okay. Who are you?” I asked, after another minute had elapsed.

Behind us, glass crashed and a woman screamed. I slipped on a slimy banana peel. My skull kissed the curb.

The bum offered a hand. “Central Nexus 4-B Guy, at your service,” he said, the accent and tweed suddenly again in evidence. The body odor had now vanished, perhaps displaced by a touch of cologne. “Forgive the charade, but I did not wish to call undue attention to myself as I awaited your release.”

“You have been calling undue attention to yourselves for years. Don’t you read *Super-True Blasto Investigations*?” I pressed a hand to my bleeding forehead. “Are you the one who got me out of that cell?”

“At your service.”

“But how?”

“By using our highly advanced technology and persuasive techniques.”



“But why?”

“Is it not evident? A long imprisonment would have been terribly anticlimactic, and not at all sporting, my dear fellow. Your activities would be gravely inhibited under such circumstances. Not at all a fair test of your ability to turn things around for your species. And besides, you didn’t actually smite the blighters in question, did you? You’re no murderer. So my action comports with one or more of your human conceptions of justice.”

“Great.”

“You should be glad. I got you out of jail, did I not?”

“Yeah, Central Nexus 4-B Guy, you did. What I’m wondering is why.”

“A long imprisonment at this point would have been terribly anticlimactic, and not at all sporting, my dear fellow. Your activities would be inhibited under such circumstances. Hardly a fair test of your ability to turn things around for your species.”

“You just said that.”

“You repeated the question, so I repeated the answer.”

“So how long then, do I—”

“Ah, here we are!” We had indeed reached the main road. The neighborhood was well-lit and apparently skulker-free, though I did see a raccoon.

“As I understand it, you have two goals,” 4-B said.

He stopped walking. So I stopped walking.

“Uh, persuade my fellow humans that flying saucers are real and that the Earth is in danger of being attacked? And figure out a way to defend ourselves? Is that two or three?”

“If we aliens from outer space undertake an all-out attack of the earth, the goal of you Earthlings can only be to defeat us, get the thing sorted that way. Which is jolly well never going to happen. We aliens being far too advanced and superior to humans in every way.”

“Of course,” I said drily.

“You don’t even have desktop computers yet.”

“It’s still the 1950s. Give us a chance to develop.”

“That’s the spirit! Point being, though, that defeating us in war is not a goal to which you humans can reasonably aspire. What you *can* reasonably aspire to do, however, is *prevent* our attack—an attack which, if we gave it our all, must annihilate humanity. Now, let us stipulate that annihilation of all humanity is off the table for now.”

“Very well.” I nodded agreeably. “Let us stipulate it.”

“And if the only thing you can do is *prevent* our attack, or limit an attack already underway, what are the two subsidiary goals you would want to achieve in pursuit of that larger end?”

“Well, uh, okay, I’m still a little woozy here, because of the abductions and everything, but...uh, well, one, persuade the people of Earth that we are being threatened by aliens from outer space?”

“The other?”

“Uh, uh, uh...okay. I know this, I know this. It has to do with our conversation on Station Qzykwvzu, right?”

“It is disturbing that you remember the name of our secret station so accurately.”

“Hey, I have no idea how to—”

“Fine, fine. You lack the celestial coordinates. Continue.”

“I guess the second goal would be to persuade the intellectuals and those whom they influence in the churches, publishing houses and studios to adopt a more rational epistemology. Persuade them to accept the validity of the senses as a means of direct awareness of the world. Persuade them to accept the validity of reason. To accept the fact that when properly employed, our conceptual faculty does give us knowledge of reality: of the only reality that there is, not some distorted version of it. That to perceive an object in a particular sensory form *is* to perceive it. That there is no other way to perceive it and nothing but reality that we could be perceiving. That the axioms at the foundation of our knowledge, including the law of identity, are self-evident and can be unproblematically accepted as such.”

“Good. Good. That is a serviceable synopsis. Do you have a strategy for accomplishing these goals?”

“Not quite yet, 4-B. I’m still getting my bearings here. I’ll think things through as soon as I can. Just let me recuperate a bit. I know I’m going to come up with a real potent strategy.”

“I don’t mean to pressure you. But as long as you’re still flailing about for a strategy, may I...?” He pulled a sheaf of papers from somewhere and handed them to me.

“What’s this?”

“Simply a method of structuring your institute—”

“My institute?”

“Your planet has a lot of organizations founded to try to convince people of things. I advise founding an institute for the advancement of interplanetary awareness and rational epistemology. You could call it the Institute for the Advancement of Interplanetary Awareness and Rational Epistemology. To consist of two departments. One department devoted to disseminating the truth about flying saucers and other UFO phenomena, educating your fellow Earthlings about the imminence of the invasion from outer space unless concerted action is taken, all that sort of thing. The other department devoted to disseminating your explication of the validity of the senses and the efficacy of reason. I suggest holding seminars and distributing pamphlets door-to-door.”

“I feel as if I’ve almost already been conquered.”

“Oh, no! Not a bit of it. It’s just a suggestion. If you have better methods to inject humanity with the truth about flying saucers and the proper bases of thought and knowledge, by all means, go for it. But I’ve included an incentive plan for propagating levels of—”

I had no idea what 4-B was up to but I really was exhausted what with all the kidnappings and everything. “Okay, I’ll look at it.” I played the pity card. “I’d better get home now. I really am very tired.”

“Funding will also be very important, especially in the beginning, until you have plenty of devoted followers willing to give you all their money. I have provided detailed information about how Joe Purdy Bo Hippenthwaite obtained the capital for *Super-True Blasto Investigations* by investing in the Soviet ventures of Armand Hammer, the full range of which have yet to come to light in your media. If you threaten to reveal the Hippenthwaite-Hammer-Stalin connection, Hippenthwaite will be happy to donate to your institute.”

“Armand Hammer...that’s the, uh, baking soda guy?”

The alien shook his head, almost achieving a decent simulation of exasperation. "Aren't you acquainted with your own Earth economy and history? Arm & Hammer sells baking soda. The company had been in business for decades before Armand Hammer was born. Its arm-and hammer symbol represents the god of fire, Vulcan. Armand Hammer's father, a socialist, named his son after the arm-and-hammer symbol of the Socialist Labor Party of America. Armand Hammer of Occidental Petroleum has nothing to do with Arm & Hammer, the seller of baking soda. Armand Hammer was elected chairman and CEO of Occidental one Earth year ago. All this information is available in Earth records."

"Okay, but, uh...I'll review this and... Look, I kinda know who Armand Hammer is, but I also know that his ties to the Soviet Union are hardly a secret. Philanthropic concern for the starving Soviet masses or some such."

"More than what is public about the nature of his activities is contained in these documents. Now, this chap Hippenthwaite poses as an ardent anti-Communist, an ardent foe of all mass slaughter and social regimentation conducted in the name of extracting from each according to ability and delivering to each according to need, is that not so?"

"It is so."

"Jolly good. The documents establish that Hippenthwaite benefited financially from Hammer's concessions in the Soviet Union under one Vladimir Lenin. Hippenthwaite invested in a pencil factory that Hammer built for the Soviets. Was Hippenthwaite being merely unprincipled and pragmatic, or was he in fact sympathetic to the Communist cause? Either way, knowledge of his early doings must render suspect his current anti-Communism. Even if he has seen the error of his ways, that possibility can be easily discountenanced using standard human journalistic procedures. Almost all the human ethical codes regard hypocrisy as a sin. It would be bad for this man if his youthful flirtation with Communism were publicized, would it not? He would be tainted."

"Yes." I nodded. I yawned. I blinked.

"We got most of this material from Soviet archives that are currently inaccessible to the West, so you probably should not indicate its provenance. I managed to covertly photocopy the documents on site, using our alien super-technology. But you can let on that you know the sorts of things Hammer was doing in the 1920s during the period when Hippenthwaite aided and abetted him. Let him know that you know the sort of things that you could know only if you really knew them, and in this way the other things that you know but which he doesn't know will be more credible."

"Mm hm," I said. "If you ever want to give up the job of conquering Earth, you have a future in the field of manipulation and intimidation."

The next thing I knew, Central Nexus 4-B Guy had hailed a cab for me and given the driver my home address.

Great. Central Nexus 4-B Guy knows where I live.

"Cheers, then. Keep me in the loop," 4-B said as I rolled up the window.

The cab moved. Central Nexus 4-B Guy receded into the mists.

"Hey, ain't you that guy that killed them two people?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MY BODY AND MIND WERE SO depleted that the cabbie's query only half-registered, and as we approached my address I only half-consciously expected the scrum of media bums armed with mikes, cameras and note pads that greeted us as we approached the apartment building. It required all my remaining will and energy to elbow my way to the door.

"Did you kill those two people?" "Why were you released? Was it on your own cognizance?" "It's *recognizance*, dummy!" "Does this have anything to do with the flying saucers you've been talking about?" "Yeah, tell us about the flying saucers!! Ha ha ha!" "What is your connection to the deceased?" "Did you see the victims on the day of the murders?" "Were you ever in Wisconsin?" "What were you doing in Wisconsin?" "Have you got something against farmers?" "Are there Communists in the State Department? Wait, let me amend that. Are there *aliens from outer space* in the State Department?" "Ha ha ha!" "If *you* didn't kill those people, who did?" "If you could say something to the mother of Beelzebub Willis right now, what would it be? This is your chance!" "How do you even know that you exist? What if this is all a dream? What if you're just a brain in a vat?"

Bathroom. Bed. I was only murkily aware of the newspaper people, magazine people, TV people murmuring and rumbling outside, or of the imprecations of other apartment dwellers in the building. Nothing could now disturb the sweet quietus of sleep. Not the mob outside, not the thunder and the rain, not the memory of death, not the looming of doom. Nothing but my dreams.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PURDY BO HIPPENTHWAITE WAS NOT SURPRISED to see me. Nor happy to, being afflicted by the memory of his collusion with the feds in the matter of my recent arrest. I would dispel that dark cloud and replace it with another, darker one.

“Siddown, siddown, get a load off. Whaddup, pup?”

“Hey boss,” I said acknowledgingly. “Just wanted to get the sketch of how we’re going to approach this series of articles, yup. And touch base with you about another matter as well.”

“Ungh. Lots doing.”

“Oh. Should I come back later?” I glanced at my Timex.

“Well, I...” Hippenthwaite pondered his desk.

Despite his corpulent physique, my captain seemed somehow deflated as he slouched behind the vast, too-acrylic mass, as he hunted for something interred in the sea of piles of things. Maybe someone had stolen his rhyming dictionary.

“Now, vis-à-vis the abduction of me....”

“Oh yeah.” He crimsoned. Yes, it’s a verb. “Uh...you okay?”

“Now?”

“Those coppers.” He shrugged.

Hippenthwaite was, clearly, resentful of me for my having put him in the position of having put me in the position he had put me in so that I now probably considered him a snake. Embarrassed and resentful. If he had helped in some trivial way to set me up, had not he, too, been victimized? Manipulated and coerced in turn? The cops had been going to get me one way or another. Wasn’t bloodlessly better?

“Keep him talking” was no doubt what he had been asked to do. I ought not be upset with him for this. Was I upset with him for this?

Nah. I didn’t think so.

On the other hand, it was hard not to suppose, at least in the form of an incidental side thought, marginal, no biggie, type of thing that flits in and out of consciousness, that a better man than Hippenthwaite would have sought to alert me of my danger despite the sundry pitfalls and inconveniences besetting him on all sides. Perhaps some smidgen of this supposition was manifest in my demeanor. And so he writhed and shrank, did Joe Purdy Bo Hippenthwaite.

Some philosophers claim that it is impossible to know whether other minds even exist, let alone what thoughts and feelings transpire in these other minds. But the contents of this man’s mind filled the air like steam in a sudatorium.

“Forget about the police,” I said. “Forget about the silly charges against me.”

“They had the wrong man,” Hippenthwaite essayed.

Case of mistaken identity. Could happen to anybody.

“Yes. They had the wrong... ‘man.’ ”

He nodded numbly, dumbly.

I crossed my legs and leaned back in the chair with an air of mastery of the situation.

“I guess I’ll just start typing up the articles and sending them to you,” I said. “Do you suppose, boss, that since this is a real abduction, not the usual hooey we cook up, you’ll sell even more papers than usual?” His silence was sour. “You’re probably right. Probably not. Authenticity can be faked too, right? Lord knows that you can make most

people believe almost anything, so long as no cognitive effort is required of them. Thinking! That's what we must not require of the herd. Anyway, I feel I have most of the material I need to proceed. Your readers will get their money's worth. No pictures, I'm afraid. It is hard to pack a camera when you're in the middle of being abducted by an alien from outer space and he won't let you pack anything. But I'm sure that you have images in the morgue we could run. Anything featuring fuzzy disks will be fine. Or one of your artists can doodle something."

"So you was abducted, eh? By consarned aliens, too." He shook his head grimly. This was sympathy.

"Yes. And the alien invaders made it clear, or their representative made it clear—well, I don't know strictly speaking if he was their representative or what he was, but he seemed to have authority, and to be speaking for the others, and he sure knew how to use a ray gun—but point is, he made it clear, very, very clear, that unless we human beings get our act together, and fast, we will be conquered. Either we'll be coercively retrained, with the whole Earth for all practical purposes converted into a concentration camp with the aliens as our indoctrinators; or the whole planet will be incinerated. Zap. Like that. I think they're putting the latter option on the back burner for now, but it is still a very distinct possibility."

"Incinerated, eh?" He scratched his chubby chins. "Dat's pretty bad."

"Yeah. So, have I got the go-ahead? I can have the first installment for you by the end of the week."

"Sure...sure...sounds good."

He was fading out on me. I wrenched him back into the moment.

"The other thing, and this is really why I flew into New York to see you, boss, is that I'd like to request funding for an Earth-defense project. You know, get something in gear to try to prevent the alien invasion."

"Way-ul, I—"

"Now hear me out. I'm establishing an institute that will be dedicated, on the one hand, to educating people about the aliens and the importance of preventing them from invading Earth; and, on the other, to educating them about sound principles of epistemology—perceptual realism, reason, objectivity, the whole works. The institute will consist of two departments dedicated to these goals. The aliens are offended by the mystical and skeptical lines of Earthling epistemological thinking, especially the lucubrations of Immanuel Kant, which has been so influential in helping people to rationalize their subjectivist leanings. You know what I mean, right? The sort of thing in *The Critique of Pure Reason* about how we may have confidence in the lawfulness of the so-called 'world of appearances' only because that's the realm that the mind itself pre-consciously creates via sundry synthesizing mechanisms which, however, like everything in the 'noumenal' world of things-in-themselves, are inaccessible to the human mind. That type thing."

"Oh, uh huh. Sounds daffy-doo."

"Sure does. According to Kant, what difference does it make whether we can truly know reality, so long as we can have confidence in the universality and inescapability of our subjective confections in the subjectively created realm of phenomena? What difference does it make whether we can know anything *really* about *real* reality, eh, so long as we 'know' that the relating done by our mentally-imposed subjective categories

inevitable results in the same ‘features’ of phenomenal ‘reality’ for every human ‘knower’? For then we all share the ‘same’ ‘reality’ and can deal with each other on the basis of the shared subjectively injected aspects of this shared world.”

“Mmf.”

“One problem, of course, aside from the sheer arbitrariness of Kant’s approach, is that, granting his apparatus of categories, there can be no limitation on the supposed nature and consequences of the subjective synthesizing agencies—not if reality as such, being inaccessible to us, cannot be the standard by which to judge the truth of our claims about reality. After all, the nature of any noumenal influences on the phenomenal world must be just as unknowable as everything else about ‘things-in-themselves.’ Kant wanted to say that the phenomenon-shaping categories, time, space, existence, causality, all the rest of it, are necessarily determinative of the merely phenomenal world—which, again, I must stress, for Kant is not actual reality, not so far as we know, i.e., not reality as it is ‘in itself’ instead of as created by the alleged pre-conscious processing. So how then does Kant *know* that the phenomenon-synthesizing agencies of the human mind are either necessary or have certain features as opposed to certain other features, and therefore must yield phenomena of only a certain nature? Right? I mean, it’s ridiculous! My point being, if other thinkers (or non-thinkers) wish to run with the idea of each subject as creating his own world, but also wish to dispense with Kant’s allegedly universal and inescapable noumenal categories, what’s to stop them? Not any *reality*-based criteria! Everybody’s subjective world can be different. You have your reality, your filtering mechanism, I’ll have mine, my reality and filtering mechanisms; and as to ‘real’ reality, who cares, right? Real reality is out already. Nobody needs to consult or defer to a standard purported to be grounded in a realm purported to be unknowable. So what we have is unwavering blasé skepticism about the possibility of arriving at objective truths about the world combined with absolute confidence in the sacrosanct ‘validity’ of whatever subjective notions and impulses one happens to have, regardless of their actual nature or actual origin. Then it’s no longer about universal structures of mind shaping a common phenomenal experience but your unique structures shaping my world and yours shaping yours, etc. Anyway, whatever the trivial differences in details...the aliens hate all that sort of thing.”

“Wild!”

“And it’s not just Kantianism that the aliens hate. Any repudiation, implicit or explicit, of the possibility and grounds of objective knowledge tends to get their goat. They reject the faith that is at the core of all religions, for example.”

“What the doggone...? Saying I ain’t supposed to go to church or somethin’?”

Hippenthwaite’s dudgeon, at which he snatched as at a reed in a hurricane, was pro forma at best.

“Oh, I don’t think they care whether we follow any particular social ritual, boss. The question is our method of thinking. They uphold reason and they reject skepticism and faith. In fact, the space aliens believe that the battle between skepticism and faith is a false alternative, that these two are two mutually parasitic sides of the same anti-objective coin.”

“Yowza.”

“They admit that some human beings do espouse an objective epistemology. But their investigations have led them to believe that way too many of us are deranged in our basic dispositions. If we human beings don’t become more rational and objective in our

approach to knowledge, if we don't accept our ability to perceive reality and to follow sound epistemological guidelines on the basis of that perception, we're at risk of being annihilated. At the very least, the aliens will try to reeducate us. I don't know what their reeducation protocols would be like but I'm pretty sure it won't be pretty."

"Yeah, okay, bub. Here's the rub. I'm busy heah, right?" Oh. "Cuz I'm the publisher and editor and whatnot. Now, you say, reeducation camps. Wild. People might be a bit touchy because of the war. But okay. You say atheist commie aliens, okay. You say, eyewitness. Okay. Wish we had something more substantiatory, but we'll work with it. Type it up, type it up. Hup hup hup. Use all the flash and powie ya got. But all this philosophy stuff, set that guff to the side, okay? Stick to aliens. Philosophy don't sell papers. Other than that, we're fine, just type it up. Pine. Tine. Dine. Capers. Okay?"

"But about the institute..."

"Institute?"

Albert Thespo III, lately of Harvard, an expert in linotype and sociology, burst into the room. "Can't wait any more, boss! Do we go with what we got, or not? The compositors are on tenterhooks!"

"Well, go," Hippenthwaite grumbled. "Did Ann get a look at it?"

"Yes."

"Dagnabbit, rabbit! Watcha waitin' fer, sir? Papal dispensation? Hypo-agglutination? Get a go on! Sure!"

"But on other occasions, you have insisted—well, very well, very well." The lackey scooted.

"Well, that's it," Hippenthwaite said, swiveling his attention back to me. "How about personally, everything okay wichyoo?"

"Are you asking me this because I was kidnapped by aliens from outer space or because I was falsely arrested for murder, or both?"

The boss looked uncomfortable again.

"The feds is the feds. I'm between a rock and a hard place there. Okay?" He was morose and adamant. "What I gonna do, they tell me, keep him on the line. He's a killer! Fine. What can I do, ace? You say, you been kidnapped by aliens from outer space; feds say, keep him on the line, he's a disgrace to the race. Put yourself in my place. Glad they cleared it up. Yup. Mighty glad, lad."

I nodded. "Good points. Let's move on. Looking to the future now, it appears that I'm the only chance the human race has for survival." I chuckled and shook my head at myself. "All right, maybe that's a little grandiose. But I do think I know what it will take to get the aliens to back off. The institute may help. We have to try it anyway."

"Institute?"

"What I've been trying to tell you about. I think \$25,000 in seed money will do it. I'll accept a check. As long as it doesn't bounce, of course."

"Don't even joke like that. It ain't funny, bunny."

"It'll be even less funny if your commie past receives more public attention than you would like."

"Huh?? What're you yapping about, lout? Allowances is allowances, but if you think you're going to hornswoggle me into—"

"Can we skip the protestations phase?" I waved a hand, dismissing all compunction and delay. I feel a bit sad in retrospect that I had interrupted him, as I missed what he



would have come up with to rhyme with “hornswoggle.” “Yes, boss, I’m blackmailing you to get start-up funding for a critical Earth-saving enterprise. It goes against all my lapsed principles to put the screws to you this way. But time is short, and I’m gonna do what I have to do to save the human race from the alien invasion. Perhaps it is impossible. But I can’t just stand by as we trudge dumbly to our doom, can I? No, I must try to prevent it. And as far as I know, I’m the only man on Earth who fully realizes the danger and has even an inkling of how to stop it. So cough up.”

Hippenthwaite rose a half-inch off his chair in righteous fury. “Now wait just a cottin’-pickin’...”

“Armand Hammer. Ring a bell, boss? Nothing to do with baking soda.”

“Huh?”

“Armand Hammer applied for a passport in 1922. Not long after the Bolshevik revolution and not very long after the inauguration of Lenin’s New Economic Policy, Lenin’s partial retreat from the Communist policy of annihilating markets. Armand’s Communist father, Julius Hammer, had been jailed for performing a botched abortion. So Armand was sent in his sire’s stead to secure concessions and otherwise serve as an American tool for Communist interests.”

“Now what’s that got to do with—”

“Hammer told the passport office that he was going to Europe to secure goods for the family business. Didn’t tell them anything about visiting Russia during the same trip, though, did he? Of course, later on he protested that he had gone there for philanthropic purposes. As if being an agent for Lenin to aid and abet Communist rule were a matter of mere philanthropy.”

“What it all got to do with me, see?”

“Is it just a coincidence, Mr. Hippenthwaite, that travel records show that you were in Moscow at the same time as Hammer, just before the factory began operation? Is it just a coincidence that the amount on this check—” I handed him the xerographic copy of the check drawn on his account and made out to a dummy corporation. “—shows the exact same amount—” I showed him another piece of paper. “—as a deposit in an account funding materials shipped to Hammer’s asbestos operation, then to his pencil factory?”

“I don’t know nothin’ about no....”

The folder had details and documentation. I fanned the pages for him and plunked them down in front of him.

“I have copies, of course.”

The boss perused the blotchy records for a few minutes. Hammer’s asbestos concession had been under the control of a Special Concessions Committee headed by a Feliks Edmundovitch Dzerzhinsky, the first head of the Cheka, i.e., the secret police tasked with murdering counterrevolutionaries, among other clerical duties. Dzerzhinsky had launched a spy operation hatched to convince the West—through fake reports relayed through members of a fake anti-Communist group in Russia called the Trust—that Lenin’s New Economic Policy signaled an impending abandonment of Communism. The idea was to persuade the West that the Communist regime was hanging by a thread, a thread that the anti-Communists could snip if only the West would lift its economic blockade. Since the Soviets had no embassies as yet to mediate their spying on other countries, and since certain stateside organizations abetting covert operations had been

shut down by a certain John Edgar Hoover, it would be handy to have Western businessmen on the payroll. Businessmen like Armand Hammer.

With the Soviets' approval, Hammer would publicize the mining concession; and it would be okay to publicize it, for the mine supposedly represented nothing more than a benign cooperation between the two great peoples. Concealed from the public, of course, was how the board of directors of Allied Drug and Chemical would now be stuffed with Communists. Also concealed was how Hammer would distribute funds to Comintern agents in the United States at the behest of the Soviets, and how he would establish a banking operation to send funds to the Soviets in the guise of enabling Russian immigrants to send money to their families back home.

The photograph to "Comrade Hammer" that Lenin sent to his new American partner had never made the papers either.

But the documents now in my possession, the documents which Hippenthwaite was no longer pretending to read—these documents did what documents do. They documented. To be sure, documents can be faked. But fake documents cannot be corroborated by genuine documents. And Hippenthwaite and I both knew that these were the type of documents that could be substantiated by other documents, those saved by banks and archives and so forth.

Hippenthwaite claimed, feebly, that when making his investments he'd known nothing of the sordid details of Hammer's ventures, nothing of the true nature of the man's cooperation with the Soviets. But if my boss had been thus blind, it could only have been by willful averting of gaze. Hippenthwaite had been in too many of the wrong places at the wrong time to plausibly plead blanket ignorance.

I continued with my presentation a little longer, once in a while rattling a page at him. But it was a won cause.

"Look here now, I didn't know the Soviets were aliens from outer space," he muttered at one point.

"I'm not saying that the Soviets are aliens from outer space," I said. "I never said that, never implied that. I'm saying Communists and enemies of the United States and freedom and that Armand Hammer is a traitor and that you either knew it when you were dealing with him or you didn't want to know. So...."

Finally, Hippenthwaite reached for his checkbook. I repeated the amount I wanted. He entered the amount. He signed his name. He handed me the check. Once it was in hand and I had also signed him up for the first couple of the institute's seminars, I rushed across the street to enter the columned, vaulted edifice at which Hippo did his banking. Before converting the personal check to a cashier's check, the bank officer made a call on his clunky black telephone to confirm the payment order; which Mr. Hippenthwaite, still in a state of implosion thanks to our relationship-reconfiguring encounter, duly if dispiritedly did.

I am no sadist. My only goal was to save Earth from alien invaders from outer space by extracting the funds needed to set up an institute to spread the word about the alien invaders from outer space and to combat the Kantian philosophy according to which direct knowledge of reality is impossible and everything we perceive is mere subjectively confected appearance. If saving Earth from aliens from outer space and groundless philosophies is not your goal too, you have not gotten the memo. Get the memo. Read the memo. Study the memo. The flying saucers are real. They are very very real.

I was a blackmailer. I had looted my boss. But maybe the loot would help me save Earth from being destroyed by aliens from outer space.  
I don't want Earth to be destroyed. Do you?

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

“...TAKEN FROM US AT SO YOUNG an age, is both a terrible mystery and a terrible tragedy.” The priest paused in the issuance of the grave and gentle words, his glance bestowing a gentle benediction. He seemed imbued with an ineffable if rote wisdom and grace. “For the parents, for the brother, a hard cross to bear indeed. Perhaps it will be of some small solace to know that Beelzebub has been welcomed into the bosom of our Loving Father. Friends of the bereaved, know that even your presence offers comfort.... His twin brother Jacob would like to say a few words....”

The priest left the podium to make way for a person who looked just like Beelzebub but who walked with a milder, tighter gait than I imagined would have been his brother’s even in these hushed circumstances. When he spoke, he spoke in a monotone, in the manner of one completing an unpleasant school assignment, never looking up from his piece of paper. As I would discover soon enough, this lack of animation differed not only from his brother’s characteristic mode of being but also from his own.

No, Jacob was not Beelzebub. But when the light hit him a certain way and he was not moving or speaking, it was easy to imagine that he was.

The ceremony plodded on, with several more Catholic rituals to be performed, including the utterance of responsorial psalms that did not bear too much inspection of their literal meaning. The mourners sat, stood, kneeled, sat, kneeled, sat, stood, kneeled, stood, and filed out to the cars to make the somber journey to the grave.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Leaving the burial spot before the others, I descended the gentle hill of Holy Mortuus Lost and Found Cemetary, lost in thoughts of loss and alien conquest.

“You knew my brother?”

I turned. Jacob.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said mechanically.

“I feel no loss. I hated his sins,” he said, in the same soft and almost but not quite unmodulated tones with which he had uttered his words in the church. “And I did not love the sinner, either, which is my own failing. We are all wretched creatures.”

“Then be sorry for *my* loss,” I said, less mechanically.

“I will lie like other men do, but not in all things and always,” he said.

I started walking again, more slowly. He kept up.

“My parents required me to give that eulogy, and while I yet live in their home I must obey them. How well did you know my brother?”

“Well enough,” I said.

“I suppose you were living with him in homosexual sin. Why else would he be associated with one such as you?”

Plainly, Jacob resembled his twin in his propensity to switch subject without cumbersome preamble.

“Pardon?”

“There can be no pardon,” Jacob said, a certain swaying energy kicking in now. “It is an abomination before God as ye must surely know; and death is the penalty; it is not for *me* to pardon such as *ye*. For does it not say in Leviticus that if there be a man who lie with a man like those who lie with a woman, both of them have thereby committed a detestable act and shall surely be put to *death*? My brother has been taken, but that is the least of *his* worries. For he is damned to perdition unless the Lord in his mercy accept him among the elect. Beelzebub—which is a name for the devil, and my brother was most surely the devil—thought to escape our house and now he has escaped mortal existence. But he cannot escape the law and judgment of the *Most High*.”

“Well, Jacob, many persons are put to death in Leviticus. Adulterers. Those who curse their mother and father. Any man who lies with his father’s wife or with his daughter-in-law. Any practitioner of bestiality. Anybody that has a ‘familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death....’ A husband and wife can’t have sex when she is menstruating; if they do, bam, both must die. You agree with all that slaughter?”

“Do I agree with soap and water? Do I agree with celestial light? Do not *blaspheme*, O Homosexual! It is not for such as me or such as ye to *agree* or to *disagree* with the Lord on High, but in our *obedience* and *love* and *praise* of *Him* to find *peace* and *joy*, not for our sake but for *His*. Let him bestow his grace *as He will*.”

“Okay,” I said. I was about to repeat my condolences when I remembered that they were unwanted, so settled for “Have a nice day” and walking quickly away.

He hurried after me. “Run, sinner. Run, blasphemer! Run, corrupter of youth! Run, O Homosexual! Run and be *damned*!”

I slowed down again. “Is there something you want from me, Jacob?”

“I suppose there’s something *you* want from *me* in your unnatural lust. Well, put it out of your heart. I will not lie with man or beast.”

"I had no intention in the least." I sped up again. "Look, not that this hasn't been swell, but I really have to get g—"

"Were you his murderer, O Homosexual, as the newspapers and TV say?"

I stopped walking. He stopped walking. "I didn't kill Beelzebub." I spoke in as flat a monotone as I could muster. "And I'm sorry I crashed the funeral. That was dumb. Of me. Now I'm going home. Okay?"

"Well...do you know who did kill him?"

The speed with which Jacob relinquished his previous idea and demeanor might have baffled one less acquainted with the ways of the world than your humble intrepid investigator. It would be easy to learn more, if I wanted to. But I felt that it was best to forgo any further acquaintance with the mysteries of this particular human being.

"I'm going back to my room now." I strode away definitively.

"Wait! I'm sorry. I apologize truly. Truly, sir. We are all sinners. Lord knows I'm prideful. But I must know what happened to my brother. I know you know. Have pity! Have pity on this sordid creature, who repents in ashes and dust!"

"It's a long story, Jacob." I sighed. "And you wouldn't believe it. However, keep an eye on the doings of my institute, and you will learn some of it if you've a mind to. If you can then find in it in your heart to help us advance toward the goals expressed in our mission statement, that would be great. Maybe then I will tell you the rest of it."

We had reached the hotel.

"And now," I said, with an air of courteous but firm leave-taking, "I must bid you adieu." I had always wanted to use the word "adieu" in a sentence. One more accomplishment that the aliens would never be able to take away from me.

"No, I must know it all. I must know it now." His eyes were aglow. The proud humility was gone. The theological agenda was gone. Jacob stood before me naked in spirit, sad, lost, longing, resembling his twin brother, etc.

I looked at him. He looked at me. We went into the hotel.

His brother had been wild and tame, demanding and submissive, anything, everything...eager. Jacob was awkward, gentle, tentative, accepting of acts that in his view must damn us to a hell in which spirit-roasting flames and sundry other sadistic tortures would cause all inmates to writhe in terror and pain for all eternity, submissive. He was diligent. Dutiful. A student. Beelzebub, when I met him, could not possibly have been a virgin. Jacob could not possibly have been experienced; at least not much, at least not with men.

Finally, he rested his head on my chest and remained that way for a long time.

We dressed. I wondered whether he had done this only because he thought it necessary.

"The first thing to understand," I said, tucking in my 1950s-style short-sleeved red-and-yellow-checked shirt as he placidly observed from a semi-prone position on the bed, "is that when I met your brother I had been investigating the nature and portent of certain Unidentified Flying Objects, or UFOs, as we call them."

Jacob let out a weary and resigned sigh and shifted into another register, that of the eternally brother-afflicted. "Just what I would have expected of such a heathen homosexual as my brother." Jerking up into a sitting position, he shook his head and raised two fingers in the sign of the cross, the way people do when hoping to ward off

vampires and tic-tac-toe circles. “You will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur, by the champion of the Most High!”

“I’m more worried about the alien invasion.”

“Worry for thy immortal soul!”

“Let me tell you what happened—”

“I enjoin it by Almighty God!”

“—and condemn me after I’ve finished. But hold off on the imprecations until I’ve told the story. Okay? It’s hard enough. Your brother was murdered right in front of me.”

I reported how Jeeves had incinerated Beelzebub; how he had then abducted me in a fuzzy flying saucer; how I had been introduced to Central Nexus 4-B Guy; how 4-B had incinerated Jeeves; how I had learned of the strange, alien anti-Kantianism paradoxically blended with indifference to the freedom and lives of every person on earth; how by dint of desperate logic and rhetoric I had heroically salvaged a slender reed of hope for the peoples of Earth; how I found myself imperceptibly transferred from the alien tarmac to the tarmac of Earth; how the Earth authorities had been arrested me for murder and then released me thanks to the intervention of Central Nexus 4-B Guy; how 4-B had suggested that I found an institute dedicated to promulgating valid epistemological principles and knowledge of the true nature and portent of the flying saucers, to be funded by blackmailing Hippenthwaite using authentic-looking documents provided by 4-B; and how I had blackmailed Hippenthwaite, resulting in the visible deflation of his tawdry but proud spirit. The mass and funeral he already knew about.

Jacob listened. Finally, his voice dull and flat, he said: “My brother must be avenged.”

“Mmm. That may be harder than you think. But can you believe what I’ve told you? Any part of it? I doubt it myself. I’ve been writing it all down in hopes of maintaining my knowledge of these events, and perhaps with the idea of persuading my future skeptical self not to doubt his own memory. But even so, you know, it takes on a dreamlike quality...”

“Oh, I believe. I believe, Heathen! Ye of little faith! For I know in my heart that both *you* and the *alien murderers and saboteurs*, in closing your eyes to the *truth* of a *transcendent salvation* and hence of a realm *beyond* this petty and sordid world, this low material pit of gas and dust, are but *spawn of the devil*, but children of the true Beelzebub, who is also called *Satan*, the dark demon in whose service my foolish and perverted brother lost his very soul! I say unto you that you and all cowardly ones, all unbelieving ones, all who are vile, all who are murderers, all who are *sexually immoral*, all who practice black arts, all who are idolaters and *all who are liars* shall suffer in the sulfurous flames for all eternity! For which there can be no surcease and no reprieve!”

“Sounds like the vengeance has already been arranged. Look, I—”

“Tell me what I must do, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

He pointed at me with both index fingers; jabbed. “I will render unto you all that which I must render unto you, so that I may obtain vengeance in the name of my brother.”

“You mean, vengeance against the aliens?”

“Do they not yet live in this material realm? Did they not render putrid the living, vital flesh of my brother? Do I not yet live in this material realm? Is not my mission clear? Are you as stupid as you are damned?”

“Um, okay, I think that’s kind of a loaded question. But at least you don’t believe I’m lying to you. Do you?”

“You are most surely both self-deceived and a deceiver but not in this that you have told me.”

“Okay.”

“Thou hast spread falsehoods in your life and in what you call ‘journalism,’ but I see only truth in the words which you speak now. I know now that my brother was right about the aliens. I see your spirit. I see your truth. I see the murder of my brother, your kidnapping, your puerile and profane conversation with the alien. It is all in my mind’s eye.”

“Well, there are some questions of interpretation....”

“I know you speak with the hard hue of truth. But I caution you. I can offer no false hope. Such a one as ye shall indeed suffer the *torment of torments*. Be not confused about that! For you are a heathen! You covet the seed of man! You deny the Most High, and you deny anything beyond your puny mortal ken. For these and other reasons, you shall never know God; you can never sit in the same celestial room as The One Who Is the Lord. Nay. Rather, you will writhe in agony for all eternity, in the pit of the devil.”

“Well....”

“Nevertheless I will enslave myself to your wretched will for the sake of avenging my brother and repulsing the alien invasion. Even if it mean my own eternal damnation for binding myself to such a one as you, against all that I believe and know.”

“Look, it’s a nice offer, but....”

“Do not misunderstand me! I will eagerly obey you in all things! *All* things!”

Hmmmm....



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SO IT WAS THAT JACOB WILLIS, brother of Beelzebub Willis, ascended to the post of lecturer for the Institute for the Advancement of Interplanetary Awareness and Rational Epistemology, LLC. I was the other lecturer as well as the esteemed executive director.

Jacob was a charismatic but problematic proselytizer. Although sincere, enthusiastic, dedicated, he never fully embraced or perhaps even fully understood the principles of objective knowing being advanced by the institute's epistemological department. He treated the articles of his faith as on a par with rather than as sharply contradictory to the secular principles that he had agreed to help spread. The tension of his thought did not prevent him from exerting a powerful effect on the flock, however. I could only hope that, on net, his impact would prove more beneficial than destructive. Meantime I was getting a lot of sex, always important when the world is about to end.

"Know ye that if you refuse to *accept* the plain evidence of thine own *senses*, rejecting all plainly mystical and ergo unsubstantiated claims, you will be *damned to hell* for all *eternity!*" was the sort of thing he would intone to crowds of enrollees that for a time grew ever larger. "Do not reject *existence*, or thy own *awareness* of existence! For how else do you in your dank sin know that things *exist* and *are what they are* except by means of those senses of yours which do *perceive* that which exists, Almighty God!"

"Praise Jesus!" people in the crowd would yell. "Hallelujah!" "The *senses*, glory be!" "Save me, eyes!" "Save me, ears!" "Save me, nose!" "Save me, tongue!" "Save me, fingers and toes!" "Save me, loins!"

"Accept, accept, *accept*, ye fornicating heathens, *accept* with all thy heart and mind and soul that there is no existence but *the* existence, and glorify the same; for there is naught of this world for you to apprehend but that which lies before you in thine own gaze and touch and taste and hearing and smell, in keeping with your own mortal flesh's sacred physical means of awareness! It is *your* sensory organs, O fool who hath said in his heart that existence does not exist, in which your knowledge and salvation lies! It is the identity of what you perceive *as well as* the identity of your means of perceiving, in which knowledge and salvation lies! For it is only your sensory organs in blessed *interaction* with whatever it is that you perceive via those sensory organs which can vouchsafe unto you the *direct* and *unassailable* data about the world in a relevant perceptual form, Almighty God! And it is only thy mental integration of the percepts that gives you in turn your mighty concepts, which are what make you a Man in the eyes of the Lord, who will have vengeance, and recompense!"

"Hallelujah!" "Perceptual form!" "Data!" "Concept!"

"The entities, attributes, relations of that world are *revealed unto you by the interaction of your means of sight and the things which you do see*. For what alternative can there be, you who would Sceptically Deny? Fie on you! A seeing without anything Being Seen? A hearing without anything Being Heard? Forswear ye, you foul stinking reprobate, such most damnable folly! Do not *blaspheme* the validity of the senses by declaring in rotten-gutted epistemological waywardness, in pathetic echoing of your confounding Satan-possessed professors, that the inner sanctum of reality as it be 'in itself' be not revealed unto you inasmuch as access to the object be allegedly irremediably distorted or cut off from awareness by the very fact that thou hast a means

of seeing, a means of seeing! No! No! No! That is not the testimony of Jesus Christ the Lord!”

“Praise Jesus!” “I *do* perceive reality directly!” “My senses do *not* obscure the so-called ‘thing in itself,’ brother!” “Hallelujah!” “I can see! I can *see*!”

“Know ye, O sinners and defilers, that your senses cannot ‘distort’ what they verily *perceive* in the very function and process of perceiving it! When your eyes tell you whereat lies the *edge* of the table in the form of a visual perception, whilst your fingers running across the surface tell you likewise, now in the form of a tactile perception—”

“Amen!” “Tactile! Tactile!”

“—where lies the *edge* of the table you do now *know* in fact that the table *has* an edge—and you do now also *know where* the surface ends, however so *different* the perceptual form produced by interaction of the object with thy respective sensory organ may be! Oh yes, brothers and sisters! You perceive! You perceive! And thy acceptance that thou canst perceive only *what is*, in its thus manifested *identity*, by the use of your *senses*, which also have an *identity*, is most truly thy holy path to redemption in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord, if you but take Him into your heart and be filled with gladness! Two aspects of reality in conjoint and worshipful union, subject aware of object, do not provide you with a fiction that has nothing to do with reality! Does it?”

“No!” “No!” “Noooooooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Do not *sayeth*, heathens, that your senses distort!”

“No! No! They don’t!” “Oh praise Jesus, my awareness is *unpolluted*!”

“Do not *sayeth*, you wretched and unrepentant heathens, that when the stick pokes the surface of the water, and ‘appears’ to be severed or bent, that your eyes have tricked you into believing that the stick is severed or bent!”

“The stick is not bent!” “The stick is whole!” “Praise God! Praise Jesus!”

“Doth not a child know that it is not so, even if he knoweth not the Physics of Refraction? Doth not a child know that his finger is not broken, not sundered when it doth penetrate the surface of the water? O ye of little interpretive perspicuity! Have ye in your ‘sophistication’ forgotten your Aristotle? Or didst ye never know him? It is your so-credulous skepticism which hath deceived you, if ye *ignore* what thine own senses instruct thee about the difference between the *water* and the *air*, or the *boundary* between them, or the persistent integrity of the stick when it is *removed* from the water. The recovery of the stick is no miracle! It was never warped to begin with!”

“It is not warped!” “It is not warped!” “It’s a miracle!” “No, he sayin’ it *ain’t* a miracle!” “It is *not a miracle*; okay! Praise *Jesus*!”

“No, brothers and sisters! Testify! It is no miracle! Testify! The stick is become soggy, that’s it! Testify! Or dost thou also contend that the rippling water *sways the stone* at the bottom of a pond, making as to undulate the hard rock matter? Is that your testimony? The senses give ye information not only about the stick in unholy, impossible isolation, but the Stick-In-Water and the Stick-In-Air! For does the Stagirite not say, in Book III of the *De Anima*, that although how we interpret a special object of sight may be in error, the seeing of the special objects of sight cannot be in error? Do the senses deceive you, or do you in your ignorance or sophistry deceive yourselves?”

“We deceive ourselves, brother!” “Ohhh! We are deceived! We have been deceived!” “The stick does not bend when it pokes the water! It surely does not! Hallelujah!”

“The day of our calamity is coming soon. Our doom is rushing upon us. When the aliens travel from yonder with their armada to destroy the Earth, and with their ray guns blast your most beloved brethren into blood and ash, will ye say unto thy spouse, unto thy child, unto thy neighbor down the street, ‘We have no way of knowing whether he be dead and annihilated *in himself*, however he may *seem* so in consequence of the *seeming* incineration into *seeming* blood and *seeming* ash, for we can never know the reality ‘in itself’ in light of the inherently distortive and constitutive mechanisms of consciousness!’? Will ye say: ‘Ergo, Jack is perhaps still alive-in-himself, albeit fried to a crisp according to the report of our inherently subjective reality-constituting sensibilities and categories!’? Is that what you will say? Is it what you should say? Nay! The senses in whatever forms are valid, and self-evidently so! Almighty God!”

“It is so! It is so!” “Self-evidently so!” “I believe!” “Hallelujah!”

“To blaspheme against the Earth is the greatest sin. It comes not only in the form of assaults by aliens from outer space. I say unto you: there is nothing but *reality* of which your senses can be *aware*! The existence of a puddle of blood and ash that you know by your own eyes had been a man, a man fried before your very eyes, can signify only the cessation of biological functioning! We call this ending of life...*death*!”

“Death!” “Death!” “Death!” “The C-section of biological unction is death!”  
“Hallelujah!”

“Do not love the so-called ‘Unknowable’ more than thou lovest Life and lovest this Earth! When the aliens come and turn you into putrefying muck, thou wilt not be able to meditate on whether thou hast ‘really’ been destroyed ‘in-yourself.’ No! Thou wilt be dead and gone, not in anyone’s mere dreamy subjective construct, sayeth the Lord; not in consequence of mere *imputation* of *constructing* of cause and effect or space and time via alleged pre-conscious filtering mechanisms of allegedly reality-confabulating mind; but in objective fact! Know ye then that the aliens *will* attack! They *will* attack! They *will* attack! By Almighty God! Unless you *repent*!!”

“Oh no!” “Save us from the aliens!” “Subjective construct!” “Fact!” “Save us!”

“Save yourselves, you wretched heathens! Be blessed and be saved by your own self-defensive efforts! Be assured, you epistemologically slovenly rabble: the aliens from outer space *will* attack unless we do repent of our skepticism and cynicism, unless we *accept* without demonic equivocation and muddlement the evidence of the senses, unless we *accept* the objectively formulated conceptual conclusions based on that sensory evidence, shunning all mystical pretense and exhortation...lest we be damned to hell! Be lustrous, not monstrous! The monstrous aliens from outer space will attack unless we most lustrously and diligently practice the holy principles of objectivity, being sure always, always—”

“Always, brother!” “Oh hallelujah!” “Save us!” “Save ourselves!” “We *reject* Satan! We *reject* equivocation! We *spurn* muddlement!” “Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” “Oh yes, oh yes, the logical *integrations*! I believe! I *believe*!!”

“—always to take into account *all* the evidence relevant to any specific epistemological quest and being ready to correct, amend or refine our understanding as new evidence and better thinking warrenteth!”

“The senses!” “The aliens!” “The stick is whole!” “Praise be!” “To be is to *be*!”

“I say verily unto you, that the first-hand report of our great savior, the great founder of this institute, the Great One—

“Great One!”

“—hath as ye well know revealed unto us the martial nature of the aliens from outer space in their vast parking lot whereat they hatch their condescending and vicious schemes to subjugate our planet, perhaps, yea verily, even to destroy it. Do we wish to become the playthings of these unholy and damned creatures, these *Aliens From Outer Space?!?*”

“No, brother!” “No!” “Tell it!”

“Just as God can most easily cast wicked men into hell at any moment, so can the aliens cast us into the darkest of sub-existential pits. They have no want of power to do so, if provoked by your principles of corruption. Do not then give them an excuse to attack by with slippery foot indulging in either the follies of universal skepticism or of sense-less dogmatic faith, whether in epistemological or moral wise! Know ye, *on pain of enslavement by aliens from outer space, and the destruction of all you know, followed by eternal damnation in the hot furnace of hell where the flames do rage and glow*, that there are *objective* criteria of proper conceptualizing, *objective* criteria of proper generalizing from perceived instances, and *objective* explanations on that inductive basis. Know ye that there are objective means of *identifying* the facts of reality, means grounded both in the nature of the reality to be known and in the nature of our faculty of awareness. What is asked of *you* is only the *commitment* to objectivity. In the pursuit of any cognitive purpose whatsoever, attend ye to the facts! All relevant facts! Only facts! Logically! With all due respect for thy perceptual and conceptual nature! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost!”

“Amen!” “Identify!” “Hallelujah!” “Praise be Jesus!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ONE DAY, AS I WAS LICKING quiche crumbs off a tablespoon, a tweedy, foreign-looking gentleman approached my table at Ed's Diner.

Ed's Diner lay a few miles out of town at a rest stop on Route 9. The other patrons, being on route from here to there, never knew me. And the staff were kind enough to let me mull and scribble undisturbed even when things got busy, so long as I ordered another coffee once in a while. Undisturbed in my booth, I would ponder the strategy against the aliens from outer space and drafts of lectures for Jacob to mangle.

Central Nexus 4-B Guy, you son of a gun. Well, hurray for me. I hadn't seen the guy in months. Perhaps had even semi-convinced myself that the abduction, the murder, the off-world seminar in Kantian bullshit, the threats to conquer and/or annihilate the earth, the murder charges, the dropping of the murder charges, had never happened, none of it, that I'd dreamed it all up as a way of rationalizing sundry personal failures by pretending that I was doing something to Save Mankind. I could have resigned myself to such a demoralizing realization. Surely, being a delusional loser would be better than being destroyed by aliens from outer space. Why wouldn't it be?

"4-B. Is it you? Small galaxy." I set the tablespoon on the table and even took the time to adjust it so that it was exactly parallel to the crooked napkin. Small things can matter sometimes when nothing else maybe any more matters at all.

"It is I, Great One." The Savile-Row-clad hipster sported the same bogus facial expressions that still flashed idiotically in my dreams; and now, as he glided into a seat across from me, he flourished Warm Smile #2. I sighed. Really? Maybe impersonating a real human being is hard, even for super-science-wielding super-aliens. But, jeez, it can't be as hard as the fakeness of that fake smile implied. No doubt the lack of authenticity flowed from the desiccated nature of 4-B's soul rather than from any shortcomings in the aliens' cosmetics departments. The most convincing kind of fake, after all, is always the real thing. On the other hand, if you operate on the assumption that a fake thing is for real, you can find ways to convince yourself of that reality. But I just couldn't rustle up that kind of commitment to the amalgam of artifice that was Central Nexus 4-B Guy.

In any case, I was already sick of him again.

"Well," I said. "Here to update me, or do I update you? Like the suit, by the way. New?"

"Love the humor."

"It's just that I—"

"Your efforts to persuade the other Earthlings to adopt a more rational epistemology have failed. Your species is just as obstreperous and obtuse today as you were eighteen months ago. All the indicators still hover below zero." He shook his head sorrowfully but forgot to turn off the grin.

"Come on, Central Nexus 4-B Guy. You must know from your studies of Earth history that cultural change is not instantaneous. We are making good progress here vis-à-vis laying the groundwork for the future. We—"

"I don't see it."

"This was your idea, Give it a chance to pan out. Don't be so gloomy and pessimistic! One hundred seventy-nine attendees and counting. That's how many are showing up to

our classes. And we've distributed thousands of pamphlets." I sucked at my tablespoon. "How about some coffee? What they have here, it's mountain-grown."

"Your highest attendance was three hundred persons. You hit your peak early in the institute's existence and have been declining ever since. You're not a barmy sort. You know that decline is the opposite of growth. What is worse, the ones who attend are not benefiting. They are as afflicted as they ever were by their spasms of faith, perhaps even more so. They certainly are not converting anybody else."

"Give it time. These things need to gestate. Okay, a folder. What's in the folder? You know, if you hate Earth so much, how come you use our filing system?" I was babbling to defer the moment when 4-B pushed the button to blow up the planet. If I kept talking I'd come up with some new angle, yes, yes I would, something to persuade 4-B to prolong the reprieve.

He began reading in a monotone from a page in the folder. " 'Save yourselves, you wretched heathens. Be blessed and be saved by your own self-defensive efforts! Be assured, you epistemologically slovenly rabble: the aliens from outer space *will* attack unless we do repent of our skepticism and cynicism, unless we *accept* without demonic equivocation and muddlement the evidence of the senses, unless we *accept* the objectively formulated conceptual conclusions based on that sensory evidence, shunning all mystical pretense and exhortation...lest we be damned to hell! Be lustrous, not monstrous! The monstrous aliens from outer space will attack unless we most lustrously and diligently practice the holy principles of objectivity, being sure always, always—' "

"I know his style."

" 'The aliens from outer space will attack unless we most diligently adopt and practice the holy principles of objectivity....' "

"Yes."

4-B steepled his fingers. A waitress swung by with a pot. "More coffee?"

"I'm fine."

"What about your friend here?"

"No thank you," 4-B said.

"He doesn't care about mountain-grown," I said. She regarded me blandly and brought the brew to another booth.

"Your acolyte is not himself an apt pupil of reason himself, let alone equipped to instill its contours and protocols in others of your species."

"We're working on it. Give it time. He's open. I'm having an effect."

"Now, this phrase 'wretched heathens,' so forth. I gather that most or all persons in attendance have been religious believers, as confirmed by the chorus many of them provide in response to his utterances. I understand that such insults, when delivered by preachers, do not necessarily represent literal accusations, but are intended to spur the listener to greater virtue." Such experts on the human culture, these alien invaders. "What kind of virtue, however? The virtue of not being remotely 'heathenish,' i.e., the virtue of being the opposite of secular in one's philosophy or way of life. This is the perspective of a Christian preacher, in direct contradiction to the teachings about objectivity and reason. It's a muddle."

"We're working on it...." I caught bits of the chatter from the other tables.

Milkshakes, Nixon and Kennedy, floor rot, the weather, time to grow up, Woolworth's.

"It's a process. He'll come around."

“Thinkers like your Avicenna, Maimonides and St. Aquinas have tried and failed to forge an alliance between faith and reason. Such enterprises fail because contradictions fail.”

“I don’t disagree, 4-B,” said I.

“Your scripts are fine. Cracking good stuff.” He smiled, smiled, smiled. “Your own delivery is unobjectionable, if droning and uncharismatic. But that of your fellow pedagogue is a tad off, is it not? He never quite follows the program. Such phrases as ‘demonic arbitrary equivocation’ imply the existence of demons. And what is meant by enjoining blokes to shun ‘all mystical pretense and exhortation,’ lest they be damned to hell? Again and again, both disavowal and embrace of mystical exhortation, simultaneously. Our mission is to expunge fictional means of knowledge like mystical revelations from the Earthman’s epistemological repertoire. That is the agenda. That is the goal. Far from furthering the institute’s cultural project, your partner in the venture is actively undermining it. And he is by far the more persuasive speaker. Your own influence is negligible.”

“By far, huh?”

“We’ll need to eliminate him as a factor.”

“Eliminate?” My grip tightened on the tablespoon. Here was one of the aliens from outer space not three feet distant. One of the leading aliens. All I had to do was...uh...disembowel him with my tablespoon.

If I grabbed the knife 4-B was sure to know something was up and would use his handy-dandy mini-incinerator on me. And what if I did manage to kill him, somehow? The other space aliens would attack right away. There isn’t any more definitive way of violating a truce than killing the guy you had made the truce with. Another problem was the seven or eight other people in the restaurant, not counting staff, who would be witnessing the killing. And I doubted that the other aliens from outer space would be as willing as 4-B had proved to be to save me from a murder charge.

But I could not let him kill Jacob.

“We have observed your attempts to direct your student’s oratorical talents in a more productive direction. They have proved ineffectual. Hence he must be eliminated so that your cultural efforts will have a better chance to progress. Hope you understand. Really, it’s for the best. What is that, quiche?”

“You don’t grasp human psychology, clearly.” It was all I could do to keep from lunging across the table to try pointlessly to snap his neck. “We’re very close, simpatico. I’m having an effect. He’s gonna come around. And when he does, this thing will skyrocket. It’ll be exponential. Jacob knows how to appeal to people, bring them on board—”

“You needn’t fret,” 4-B said. “You can obtain blow jobs from anywhere on your planet.”

“Why you motherfu—”

“No alternative, I’m afraid. Of what use is building a movement that takes the Earth people to the exact opposite of our goal? We want more reason and logic, not more mysticism. You’ve given this preacher a platform that he had previously lacked. And that is jolly well not good.”

I waggled the tablespoon at him. “Look—”

“Prithee, who’s this?” Jacob.

I had been so focused on the creature across the table from me and on the dull sheen of the pewter utensil that I had not noticed him entering the diner, and now he was approaching our table and Central Nexus 4-B was retrieving something from a tweed pocket, a gesture that had looped in nightmares, the alien fingers casually enclosing the featureless little rectangle, leading to the irrevocable, in just a few more milliseconds, with no time, no time, can't let it happen...

All I had was a spoon and klutziness. I was always lousy at any physical games, any athletic stuff. I'm more on the intellectual side of things, an ideas man—fine, bogus intellection if you want to say so—but, still, mental. Mental stuff. Nothing about physical agility, physical speed. I'm sorry, Jacob, I'm sorry, but this is all I can do, and I'll never even know whether I saved you....

Don't mull, don't tally regrets, just surge, lurch against the table, indenting your gut, clutching the spoon like a shield as if you can block an omnipotent death ray that way, can somehow deflect it to turn the aggressor to ash instead of being burnt to a red crisp yourself. If you miss the little patch of space you need to reach, or say you make it but the spoon is no reflective shield, just a frigging damn spoon, well, maybe you'll be incinerated instead of the boy.

And then what? How long would it take for 4-B to finish the job?

Maybe I just didn't want to be around any more if Jacob were gone. I had come to know him for what he was, all of him, certainly not only insofar as he mirrored his brother, which was not very much anyway...although, yes, there were a few things....

For a few long moments, the normally garrulous soul-saver could only stare at that which alien death-ray-spewer and man-made soup-ladler had wrought. Finally, slowly, meticulously, he lay one index finger upon the other and thrust the cruciform symbol at me.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Ho—"

"Oh, cut the *shit*, Jacob! I just saved your life!" I nervously and gently retrieved the alien's little cube, which had clattered to the floor a few feet away from the corpse-goop and nervously and gently cradled it in my palm.

"You slew that man!" Jacob screeched. "Thou dost wield the spoon of *Satan*!"

"He was no man. He was Central Nexus 4-B Guy, the alien from outer space that I met on the extra-terrestrial parking lot. Remember? I told you all about him? Perhaps his death ray was the work of Satan, but don't you think that my ability to reverse its trajectory so that it destroyed him instead of you is best attributed to, uh, divine intervention?"

"Of which you believe not a word!"

"So now whether I believe that the handiwork of the Lord is the handiwork of the Lord is the key to the proper interpretation of it?"

"Well...no...but...but...."

This was the moment that one of the seven or eight other persons in the diner thought best to start screaming her head off.

"Let's get out of here."

Jacob headed toward the door. I began to follow but a man in an apron inserted himself between me and it. He looked stunned, blank, and determined. I will never forget the glazed look with which he confronted me. His name was Fred or Ed or Ted, something like that. He owned the place.



“Let’s wait for the police,” Fred or Ed or Ted said. He cleared his throat.

“Just...get your mop and a bucket of Clorox, and make it disappear.”

“Now you hold on....”

I raised my voice. “Everybody. You, lady, stop screaming for a minute. Everybody: the entity that was about to turn my friend into what you see there on the floor was no human being. He was an alien from outer space. I used his own other-worldly weapon against him to save my friend. That’s called self-defense. Now, I know that you may want to tell the authorities what you saw...what you *think* you saw. Please don’t. It is not only my own liberty that I’m concerned about here. As I discovered through a series of intrepid investigations for *Super-True Blasto Investigations*, the flying saucers that have been zooming around our planet are real. They’re very, very real. An alien invasion of our planet is underway. It is transpiring on many levels and in many interacting directions. I have no doubt that the loss of one of their top, uh, diplomats will exacerbate the precarious situation and increase the risk that the peoples of Earth will be annihilated rather than only reeducated by our new alien masters. If I am stuck in a jail cell, it will prevent me from doing what little I can do, probably nothing, to try to resolve the situation in Earth’s favor. Okay? Is everybody clear? So, you want to talk to the police, sure, talk to the police, yes, do that. But just know that you won’t be helping your fellow man by doing so. You will be helping aliens from outer space who are bent on conquering and/or annihilating us.”

I hurried to the parking lot before anyone could raise any debating points. More trouble. Jacob was in the parking lot, being held a captive, and Joe Purdy Bo Hippenthwaite, editor and publisher of *Super-True Blasto Investigations*, was grabbing up tufts of the preacher’s red hair and shoving a revolver into his ribs. The boy’s arms were behind him, restrained. He watched me. Watched my right hand.

Sometimes you just have to do the work of the devil. At least that’s the thought that I assume was running through his mind.

“Mr. Hippenthwaite,” I began. “Alien invaders—”

“Oh ye-e-e-e-a-a...shut it! Or I’ll gut it!”

“Um...okay. Whatever you say.”

“Think you’re so smart, eh? Heart, cart, dart, part!”

“I’ll give you back the money,” I proposed.

“Y-e-e-e-e-e-a-a-a-a.... Shut it!”

What *did* the man want, then? Go out in a blaze of non-glory? I couldn’t know the consequences of saying anything more at this moment, so I did shut it, and set my brain to the fruitless task of tactical analysis. Yes, I had 4-B’s ray gun. I just didn’t know how to *operate* it. Not really. Not with any precision. Point and press, that much I had figured out. But first I had to find a way to separate Jacob from Hippenthwaite. Pretty substantially separate. Then and only then would it be safe, sort of, to try to obliterate my former boss.

A siren wailed in the distance.

Hippo was merry. “Bee-oot-ee-ful,” he wheezed. “Get a boost to the circulation this way, eh? Heh? Yeah! Heh heh heh. Eh?”

I offered a little nod of validating acknowledgement, of his rhyming scheme or business plans or something. Anything to defuse the situation or at least defer detonating

it. Not that I had any expertise in the psychology of hostage negotiations beyond what little I had gleaned while trying to save Earth from aliens from outer space.

The man was not open to negotiations in any case. In the next moment he shot Jacob, let his scrawny body slide to the ground, shot me, and pivoted to start shooting at the swelling sirens. Apparently, he had no impulse to dominate the stage for more than a minute or so. Wasn't going to drag the thing out indefinitely. Wasn't going to...

Point and press.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

“YR,” I MUMBLED. I FOUGHT to wade my way through the haziness and wooziness, the thrumming and pounding, the aches. The pains. “Wud yr im id?”

“That’s a dear,” said the buxom nurse, patting my hand. She shoved something into my mouth and drowned it in water, and pushed my lips together with her fingers, as if she’d done it a million times.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“THE DATE. WHAT IS THE DATE?”

Maybe she was the same nurse I had seen when the fog began to clear, maybe not. Maybe they all had busts like prows. But all the milky obscurity had dissipated at last. I could see things now, could speak full syllables, etc.

“That’s a dear,” she said. When the fingers came for me I swatted them aside.

“The date! What is the date? Day, month, year!”

“Well all you had to do was ask! My dear lord. And you need your medicine. Orderly!”

“Please. Anyone would want to know.”

“October 23, 1969,” she said icily. Then her tone grew warmer, not authentically.

“What other date would it be, my dear chap?”

“4-B...?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I WAS IN AN APARTMENT NOW, a small one-bedroom affair burdened by only a few sticks of furniture and no decorative touches. From the kitchen window I enjoyed a clear view of the bricks of an adjacent building.

I did not remember having been released from the hospital or how I had gotten the apartment. No landlord troubled me. Food came once a week. Phones were different now. They had different colors and they had push buttons. Mine was beige. Model 2500. You could make tunes by pressing the buttons, e.g., “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” the nursery rhyme about how life is but a dream as you row gently down a stream.

I wondered how many other technological developments I would see before the aliens wiped us out. They were moving more slowly than I had expected. I assumed that they were being careful and thorough. By watching the news and reading back issues of *Time* magazine I began to see how many inroads the aliens were making and on how many fronts. For example, in Vietnam and on student campuses. A president had been assassinated in 1963 and his successor had not run for a second full term. The vice president under Eisenhower was now the president. He had lost the presidential race in 1960 and a gubernatorial race in 1962, but had made a comeback.

The culture was disturbing and often unintelligible. There were revolutions and counterrevolutions. People rioted, played Twister, and tried to expand their consciousnesses with dope and rock concerts. People worried about orgasms, the Soviet bloc, mystiques. The sightings of flying saucers continued as before, but only the same old conspiracy nuts paid any mind. Nobody was doing anything to stop the aliens from outer space.

I still had my bank account. A bank officer told me that a few dollars had been deposited every six months or so, keeping the account active. I used some of the money to purchase an IBM Selectric, which had a ball of font that moved while the carriage stayed put. I wondered whether the aliens used thought-beams, not typing, to create their memos and literature.

The typewriter took a little getting used to, but soon I was clacking along at a words-per-minute ten or twelve higher than what I had managed when batting out baloney at *Super-True Blasto Investigations*. Alas, the manuscript that I had begun drafting back in the 1950s was, so far as I knew, lost forever. But the years of coma had not destroyed my recollection of the dire events. I typed. I remembered it all as if it had happened yesterday.

On April Fool’s Day, 1949, the U.S. Air Force stated: “The mere possibility of as-yet-unidentified flying objects requires our armed forces to be on continuous red alert. It is, however, also true that most such objects are eventually proved to be....”

I typed and typed and typed.

And now I have reached the end. I will submit my manuscript to agents and publishers and hope for speedy publication so that the robust defense of Earth can get underway on the off chance our doom may yet be averted. You, Dear Reader, must do your bit. Help spread the word about the flying saucers and so forth. Adopt a rational theory of knowledge grounded in the evidence of the senses and human reason, and persuade your neighbors to do the same. Help raise money to develop the technology to

build a planet-wide force field. Work to persuade world leaders to implement this force field.

Good luck.

## AFTERWORD

IN THE DECADES SINCE I COMPLETED the original draft of this account, the situation for Planet Earth has grown more dire than ever. And I now know that the aliens have abandoned their reeducation effort. They've had it with us.

I know this for a fact. I know because the aliens themselves have told me.

They have told me what will now happen to humanity.

I don't know why they bothered. I guess they regard me as the official human ambassador to off-world invading forces. Perhaps they also figure they have nothing to lose by telling me all. They know that no one is listening to me. No publisher, no agent, nobody at the Laundromat.

"I'm here to let you know what we're going to do, old chap," the accosting alien said.

"You sound just like Central Nexus 4-B Guy." I was not entirely shocked. Not much surprised me these days.

"Who is Central Nexus 4-B Guy?" the alien asked with the same rote, plastic inflections so particular to 4-B.

"Somebody I met at your Central Nexus 4-B station. Before your time, I guess. Or maybe you know him by a different name."

"I'm sure he is a fine fellow. You look glum. Don't be glum. It's just not working out, dash it all." Even after all these years, the space aliens still hadn't mastered the art of fake sympathy.

"If only I had a proper opportunity to obtain a wider readership for my memoir. Then people would understand. We could still turn this around."

"Oh, do you really think so?"

"I know so."

"You 'know' so? Based on what evidence, exactly?" The space aliens don't miss a trick.

"Well, I— I mean—"

"You, of all humans, should aspire to be a consistent practitioner of objectivity. Yet even you succumb to wishful thinking." He raised a buffed palm to forestall any feeble febrile objection I might be conjuring. "Oh, I don't mean to dismiss in advance everything you might have to say to us. I don't question your sincerity. Everyone on your planet is very sincere. But we have reached an impasse here. We would suggest e-book publication if we thought that—"

"E-books lack the gravitas of printed works," I interjected stupidly. For I was and remain an ardent proponent of the gravitas.

"Again, you disappoint. I expected more from The Great One," said the alien from outer space. "In any case, negotiations no longer matter. This is more of a courtesy call than anything else. Just a heads up."

"Just advising me to expect the end of everything I know and love very shortly."

"Yes."

"May I ask you about something else for a second?"

"Give it a go."

"For a long time I have been trying to learn the fate of a person named Jacob Willis, whose life I once tried to save. No idea whether I succeeded. Do you know what happened to him? Is he still alive?"

“Hm. I understand your interest, of course, but it’s not my area. Now, shall I tell you our exact intentions for humanity? Our plans have gelled and I would be happy to outline every detail.” The anti-waiting factions had gotten the upper hand, clearly.

I hesitated. So this was it, eh? Plans had been firmed up? Really and truly? And I was about to get the scoop? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. But, once again, my intrepidity stumbled to the fore. “Go ahead,” I said finally, squeezing my eyes against the maelstrom. The strange creature from another planet leaned toward me and began to speak softly but audibly and with perfect enunciation. Although he wasted no words—was very concise and well-organized—it took him a while to lay it all out. At long last he left, as I slumped there, congealing in horror.

Oh God. Oh no. No.

What the aliens from outer space are planning to do to us is worse than I had ever suspected...so much worse....

**THE END**



## About the author

The works of David M. Brown include [\*Omelet: A Tragedy of Bill Shake-a-speare\*](#), a parody of “Hamlet” that one reader describes as a “very funny sendup of ‘Hamlet’ that is nearly as rich as the source material”; and the murder mystery [\*The Case of the Cockamamie Killer\*](#), which according to another reader “made me hate the bad guys even worse than I already normally do.”